

**THE EDGE OF**

# Armageddon

**LESSONS**

**FROM THE BRINK**

**BRUCE J. ALLYN**

**FOREWORD BY WILLIAM URY**



# **THE EDGE OF ARMAGEDDON**

## LESSONS FROM THE BRINK

Bruce J. Allyn

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THE EDGE OF ARMAGEDDON

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To dear Dasha and Yeva.  
May they, and their generation, benefit from the lessons of history.

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## FOREWORD

When my old friend and colleague Bruce Allyn sent me a first draft of this memoir, I was brought back to the early 1980s, a time when the U.S. and Soviet Union were locked in a perilous nuclear confrontation. Both sides were expending massive resources on new nuclear weapons systems. U.S. and Soviet officials were barely speaking to one another. It was, in the minds of many, the greatest level of nuclear danger since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

In search of a possible breakthrough in 1982, Bruce and I would look back to the harrowing “thirteen days” of the nuclear crisis of October 1962. We worked with Professors Graham Allison, Joseph Nye, and Albert Carnesale to organize a new exchange between the Harvard John F. Kennedy School and the Soviet Academy of Sciences on the subject of crisis prevention and settlement. Discussions turned naturally to the 1962 crisis as a key case study to learn lessons for the “second” Cold War of the early 1980s. A focus on crisis prevention seemed to offer a potential entry point that could help break the official deadlock and open up negotiations.

Bruce and I began a series of trips to the other side of the Berlin Wall and found a number of people receptive to this approach in the Soviet official and unofficial worlds. Then, with the ascent of Mikhail Gorbachev, many of these same people became top decision-makers and voices for change. Crisis prevention and negotiation became top priorities in Gorbachev’s new foreign policy, which he called “new thinking in the nuclear age.”

What followed was, in retrospect, truly extraordinary. The very first agreement signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev at their summit meeting in Geneva in 1985 was on the creation of joint nuclear risk reduction centers, expressly designed to help prevent a crisis from inadvertently escalating out of control. Bruce and I had the privilege of participating in unprecedented meetings with the key living veterans of the 1962 crisis in which they revealed to the world new and genuinely shocking stories of how close, in fact, the world had come to nuclear holocaust and reflected on the lessons of how they had managed to find a way to step back from the brink.

The fiftieth anniversary of the 1962 crisis is an excellent time to look back at those unprecedented dialogues and at the breakthrough in the 1980s to see what lessons they might hold for today as we seek to convene new dialogues and negotiations with former or actual adversaries in a world that now holds new dangers and new opportunities.

Bruce Allyn tells a gripping story. I hope you enjoy it and learn as much as I did.

William Ury  
Boulder, Colorado  
August 27, 2012

## THE EDGE OF ARMAGEDDON

It was what historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called “the most dangerous moment in human history,” a moment when the United States and the Soviet Union came to the brink of nuclear holocaust in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Had the crisis not been averted, over 150 million people would likely have been killed, according to Pentagon estimates, and a radioactive “nuclear winter” would have followed. The story of how that crisis was resolved and the world was spared is now well known, and that is not the story I want to tell here. After all, in 1962, I was only five years old. I was living with my family on a quiet street in a small town on a river in southern Oregon. Yet, like so many Americans, we felt the fear that October. Enough fear that my dad bought packets of dehydrated food in shiny foil wrapping and my godmother’s husband built an underground storage bunker. To find instructions on how to construct and use fallout shelters, all one had to do was to look in *Life*, America’s most popular weekly news magazine.

No, the story I want to tell is about the meeting I actually participated in during January 1989 with the key living veterans of the 1962 crisis. Across the table from me sat former Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, the legendary “Mr. Nyet,” a man who had been sent by Stalin to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC, in 1939, who had negotiated with Winston Churchill and Mao Zedong, and with nine US presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to George H.W. Bush. Next to Gromyko was former Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. No other ambassador played such a prolonged and crucial role in world affairs during the Cold War. He was the main channel for the White House and Kremlin to exchange ideas. And next was Sergei Khrushchev, who had edited the secret memoirs of his father, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. To my right was former US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, a core member of Kennedy’s famous “ExComm” during the missile crisis and a primary architect of the US strategy in the Vietnam War, considered the most influential US Defense secretary of the twentieth century. By his side was former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, the brilliant man sometimes referred to as “Kennedy’s Kissinger,” and former Kennedy Special Counsel and speechwriter Ted Sorensen, JFK’s confidant responsible for the famous line in the 1961 inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Fidel Castro had sent his top Politburo member and a key army general, as well as an invitation to have the next meeting with him in Havana. I had worked for five years with my colleagues to convene this unprecedented meeting. It was to be the first time that the former enemies would meet face to face to talk about the slip to the edge of Armageddon.

The meeting not only revealed shocking new information on how close we came to war (how close we may have come to using that storage bunker!), which has now become part of the legend. It also offered a profound lesson on the power of dialogue. In revisiting the missile crisis during those winter days of 1989, gathering in a Soviet Communist Party retreat center outside of Moscow set in a grove of birch and pine

trees, we began with three different stories of three “different” crises and ended with just one.

Before the Moscow meeting, as in Kurosawa’s classic film *Rashoman*, the parties to the conflict told different (and highly plausible) stories about the causes and “facts” of the same event. The American, Russian, and Cuban sides had each selected their own facts and, to varying degrees, manipulated the truth to serve their own interests. Each side had even given its own name to the event. In the US, it is referred to as “the Cuban Missile Crisis” because the focus was on Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba just ninety miles from US shores. In the Soviet Union, it was called “the Caribbean Crisis” because they wanted to emphasize the defense of their interests in the region and not refer to their secret installation of missiles (and their subsequent removal). In Cuba, they called it “the October Crisis” because for them it was just one in a series of crises, starting with “the April Crisis”—what Americans call “the Bay of Pigs,” the US-led invasion the year before.

Enough time has passed now to be able to tell the surprising behind-the-scenes stories of how we went “back to the brink,” and, most importantly, what we discovered about how to bring former enemies together for a constructive, candid dialogue that can further political change for a more peaceful world. The dialogue was used not only by Mikhail Gorbachev to advance a new foreign policy to end the Cold War; it was also used by Fidel Castro to make probes toward normalizing US-Cuban relations. As I look back, I see how we might use insights from the process we used to engage and conduct new dialogues with former enemies, whether China or Vietnam, or even current adversaries like Iran or North Korea.

The famous “Thirteen Days” began when, on October 14, 1962, a US Air Force U-2 spy plane captured photographic proof that the Soviet and Cuban governments were secretly building bases in Cuba for nuclear missiles able to strike Washington, DC, New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, and scores of other US cities.

The Kennedy administration considered launching airstrikes and an invasion, but decided initially on a military blockade of the island. President Kennedy announced in a dramatic television address to the nation that the US would not allow offensive missiles in Cuba and demanded that the Soviets dismantle the bases and remove the missiles. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev then wrote Kennedy a letter saying that the US naval blockade in international waters constituted “an act of aggression propelling humankind into the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war.”

Almost three decades later, in January 1989, I was now sitting at a table in Moscow with nine key living participants in the crisis. Most had never met before that morning, when Georgy Shakhnazarov, the closest personal aide to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, opens the first session. He shares Gorbachev’s welcoming message: “I greet the participants in the roundtable discussion, who are to interpret and draw lessons from the event which put the world on the edge of the nuclear abyss.... It was revealed then with complete clarity that common human interests can and should be regarded as of paramount importance.” Shakhnazarov emphasizes Gorbachev’s point that the “new political thinking” resulting from the Cuban crisis, its successful resolution, can be applied practically now to end the Cold War.

A greeting from US President George H.W. Bush, read by US Ambassador Jack Matlock, follows. The head of the Cuban delegation then speaks. Shakhnazarov then



asks the press to leave the room. What would follow would be shocking revelations about how close we actually came to full-scale nuclear war—an exchange between NATO and the Soviet bloc that the Pentagon estimated would kill over 150 million people (and few understood that a radioactive “nuclear winter” would follow, raising the specter of mass extinctions).<sup>1</sup> It was from our meetings that the world first learned that the Soviets had indeed delivered nuclear warheads to Cuba, something the CIA had never been able to confirm. Trucks loaded with warheads were in fact parked next to the missiles on their launch pads. The Soviet medium-range SS-4 missiles were already fully operational and able to strike downtown Manhattan and other major cities with a warhead sixty times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. And, something else never known till our Moscow meeting, the Soviets had delivered not only missiles capable of striking US cities, but also smaller tactical nuclear weapons that could be used to obliterate tens of thousands of American soldiers had Kennedy launched an invasion of Cuba.<sup>2</sup> Many in the US government had urged Kennedy to invade. As Bob McNamara would affirm at the table, if tactical nuclear weapons had been used against US troops, the US would have responded with nuclear weapons: “And where would it have ended?” McNamara had no doubts: “In absolute disaster for the world.”

Those stunning facts are now well known. The Cuban Missile Crisis retrospective was indeed remarkable in terms of its revelations. But in many ways it was even more remarkable as a successful model of dialogue and conflict transformation. The stories that follow suggest how we can use dialogue to revisit the past, to transform our (competing) stories of past events, and to open potential for a new future. They give us first-hand accounts of key events from inside the rooms of history, stories that transformed our very memory of the most dangerous moment in human history.

## The “Second” Cold War

In 1982, twenty years after the missile crisis, having fallen in love with Russian literature in college, I had become fluent in Russian. As a language student, I had first travelled to the Soviet Union four years earlier in the summer of 1978. Starting with Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, which I read sitting for endless hours with my Russian-English dictionary, I continued through Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and then took additional seminars to read and analyze Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* and Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. In the course of that summer in 1978, while in the language program at Leningrad State University, I made several close Russian friends—Volodya and Ira, a young couple who had essentially dropped out of official Soviet society; Igor, a free-thinking research physicist; and a very few others who were willing to risk a visit from the KGB for befriending an American student.

It was the summer that marked the end of the period of *détente* initiated by President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s that had led to improved US-Soviet relations. While I was in Leningrad, the Soviet mood shifted: The government had put dissidents Natan Sharansky and Anatoly Ginzburg on trial in one of those public shows many thought were part of the past. The next year Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan, signaling the death knell of *détente* and the onset of the “second” Cold War. In Europe, there was an intense confrontation over new deployments of nuclear missiles. In September 1983, a Soviet MIG fighter shot down Korean Airlines flight 007, instantly killing 269 passengers and crew, including US Congressman Larry McDonald, a staunch opponent of Communism and former president of the ultraconservative John Birch Society. The shoot-down led to further escalation of harsh anti-Soviet sentiment and was one of the most upsetting crises of the Cold War era. The aircraft was flying from New York to Seoul via Anchorage when it strayed into prohibited Soviet airspace around the time of a planned missile test. (The American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh later argued that the shoot-down was more a result of Soviet confusion than viciousness.) The US had for years been engaged in intelligence activities, routinely flying specially-configured Boeing 707s equipped with electronic communications surveillance equipment over the Barents Sea and other areas over which KAL 007, a Boeing 747, had flown. Each side used the tragic incident to condemn the other.

Once again the entire world was viewing life through the prism of the bipolar US-Soviet nuclear confrontation. Each side dehumanized the other and presented a chilling face of the enemy in official statements and popular culture. Fairly or not, President Reagan captured the mood when he called the Soviet Union “the focus of evil in the modern world.”

Reagan’s speech carried the imprint of the worldview of Harvard historian Richard Pipes, who served as Reagan’s advisor on Soviet affairs in the National Security Council during 1981–82. I had started my master’s program in Soviet Studies at

Harvard in 1982, when Pipes left the government to return to teaching. Professor Pipes was a distinguished scholar who had written what was widely considered to be a brilliant history of the Russian Revolution. I was required to take his basic course on Russian imperial history. Pipes viewed my school of Soviet scholars, who sought to travel to the Soviet Union and engage the people and culture, as aspiring revisionists who were simpletons and/or Communist dupes. Pipes had not been to the Soviet Union for over two decades when he joined Reagan's team as the country's top Soviet advisor. I am not sure whether it was due to inability to get a visa or a matter of moral principle. He had personal experience of Stalin's brutal takeover and occupation of his native Poland in 1939. He was on record as saying that all Soviet citizens were "the helpless victims of a totalitarian regime driven primarily by a lust for power." The Nobel laureate writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, author of the anti-Stalinist *Gulag Archipelago*, said that Pipes gave us "the Polish version of Russian history." As I sat in his course over the months, I got the clear impression that Professor Pipes was absolutely certain that talking to Soviets would yield only propaganda. He conveyed a sense that the only really useful knowledge about the Soviet Union was to be gotten in Langley, Virginia, from classified CIA documents. In 1976, he was the head of the CIA's "Team B," which argued that US national intelligence estimates had underestimated Soviet economic and military strength and ambitions for global domination (most all of Team B's assertions were later shown to be wrong). Pipes was a leading critic of improved relations under *détente*, which he described as "inspired by intellectual indolence and based on ignorance of one's antagonist and therefore inherently inept."

So we graduate students joked among ourselves that we were faced with the choice either to be part of the naïve and feeble-minded "go there and check them out" school of Sovietologists or join the tough-minded "guns and bombs" school of Sovietologists, whose adherents stayed home reading classified reports and studying books about Soviet military policy.

The rising star in the "guns and bomb" group was George W. Bush's future Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, with whom I sat in discussions of Soviet policy at seminars at the Harvard Kennedy School. Rice had just completed her dissertation at the University of Denver focused on the role of the Soviet Union and government-military relations in Czechoslovakia. Czech émigré Josef Korbel had made a deep impression on Rice when she was an undergraduate in Denver. Korbel experienced first hand Stalin's ruthless exercise of power and the terrible costs exacted by the imposition of Soviet rule.<sup>3</sup> First forced to flee the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939 and then, fleeing the Soviet sponsored Communist coup in 1948 when he was a patriotic young Czech diplomat, Korbel was a walking testament to the horrors of Communism. Rice was also deeply affected by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which commenced just before she started writing her dissertation. She had been appalled with President Jimmy Carter's reaction of "open-mouthed shock" when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. To Rice, Carter seemed naïve and appallingly uninformed. At that moment, she became a Republican.

At a tutorial in Denver with security expert Catherine Kelleher, Rice would recall, she "began to gravitate toward military affairs."<sup>4</sup> Rice said she liked the topic of Czech

military policy and the role of the Soviet Union because it was quantifiable and did not involve “Kremlinology,” the study of the relationship among Soviet leaders, which was largely a black box to Westerners. Rice would say: “...militaries had things to study, and they had to have exercises and they had to write, and I liked military history and military affairs.”<sup>5</sup> Guns and bombs were indeed things that could be studied. My problem was that the focus on the military, on what could be counted and studied, did seem to be prudent hard-nosed realism; but it largely discounted human psychology, which anyone could see was an important driver of the confrontation.

When I first sat in a seminar with Rice, I was struck (like everyone else who ever met her) by her extraordinary intelligence and composure. She was extremely polished, polite, and unflappable. She would later be given the nickname “Warrior Princess” at the National Security Council. In my view, she also had a strong set of fixed ideas when it came to the Soviet Union. Rice had been to Moscow only once, as a student for several weeks in the summer of 1979 to improve her Russian. She enjoyed interacting with Russian students, and riding the Soviet subway. But, as she herself underlined, it was difficult at the time for any graduate student studying political topics to get accepted for a long-term program inside the Soviet Union. Rice’s exposure to real Soviet life was thus very limited. And it was Soviet officials who were keeping the door shut.

So, from my perspective, American policy toward the Soviet Union, and our university courses, were too strongly influenced by Eastern European émigrés, most of whom spoke good Russian and who admittedly knew the evils of the Stalinist regime first hand. But they had prejudices that could seriously mislead. Their experience was decades old at this point. Stalin had been dead for three decades—since 1953, four years before I was born. I spent my childhood not in Prague or Warsaw but in rural southern Oregon, with no sense of history other than that one of the last Wild West battles with the Native Americans on the American frontier was with the Modoc tribe not too far from my hometown. I was not sure it was possible, but I wanted to try to see and understand the Russians free of preconception and prejudice.

## **Five Years of Preparation**

In 1983, due largely I think to my fluent Russian, I was fortunate to have been selected to be the youngest member and bilingual “rapporteur” of the delegation of top scholars and former officials in a new Harvard-Soviet Joint Study on Crisis Prevention. It was part of the Harvard Avoiding Nuclear War Project, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. A number of critics in the “guns and bombs” school disparaged members of the Harvard Joint Study with the Soviet Academy of Sciences for the very act of meeting and talking with Soviets, for being naïve, for being “duped by KGB stooges” who presented themselves as scholars, for being willing collaborators to support an evil regime. This, I would discover later in my career, working in the Middle East and North Africa, is always the challenge of pursuing engagement with an undemocratic regime in the name of peaceful, gradualist reform. I was convinced that engagement was the best way to expose people in a closed society to free thinking and new ideas, and to find colleagues who might become allies in the struggle to create greater openness and more democracy. As it turned out, our key partners in the Joint Study would later become top ministers and aides to Mikhail Gorbachev and would lead a democratic reform process that no one expected or predicted, neither the CIA nor anyone else I knew. “We tend to forget,” my doctoral thesis advisor and Harvard historian Adam Ulam later wrote, “that in 1985, no government of a major state appeared to be as firmly in power, its policies as clearly set in their course, as that of the USSR.” Even Richard Pipes acknowledged that the Gorbachev revolution was “unexpected.”

We had the very first meeting of our Joint Study on Crisis Prevention in the United States in 1983. It was a time when almost everyone I knew had a pervasive sense of crisis and urgency. In September, Korean Airlines Flight 007 was shot down. In November, ABC aired the television movie “The Day After,” which portrayed with chilling realism the aftermath of a nuclear war as seen through the eyes of residents of the town of Lawrence, Kansas. Over 100 million people watched the film’s initial broadcast. That night ABC opened toll-free hot lines with psychotherapists to counsel traumatized viewers. And, in a rare move in a free-market economy, there were no commercial breaks in the film after the nuclear attack had been portrayed. ABC then broadcast a live debate with scientist Carl Sagan, General Brent Scowcroft, Elie Wiesel, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and conservative writer William F. Buckley. Sagan used the analogy: “Imagine a room awash in gasoline, and there are two implacable enemies in the room. One of them has nine thousand matches, the other seven thousand matches. Each of them is concerned about who’s ahead and who is stronger.”

The American film industry seized on the fear of the Soviet threat and made films that presented crude and hostile stereotypes. There was Chuck Norris’s “Invasion USA,” in which Russian soldiers see a little girl decorating a Christmas tree, and then blow up the child, her family, and her house. It was also the time when Sylvester

Stallone made “Rambo,” where the Russians torture Stallone’s innocent, Christ-like character. Another film called “Red Dawn” (now a cult classic) portrays the aftermath of a Soviet invasion of America, helped by the Cubans and Nicaraguans. The opening scene shows a pleasant and calm September morning in a small Colorado town, as a high school teacher begins a class lesson. The teacher halts as he sees Russian paratroopers land in a field. The Russians then open fire with Kalashnikov rifles on the teacher and the students.

At the time, the Soviets also tried their hand at anti-American films. They were considerably less violent, but equally cynical in their stereotypes. The Soviet films had leaders of the American “military-industrial complex” playing golf while planning secretly to organize the launch of a US cruise missile against an American city and blame it on a Russian submarine. This would provoke a US-Soviet clash and immediately halt US-Soviet arms control negotiations, which were a threat to the plotting golfing partners because successful arms reduction would lead to a decrease in demand for the guns and bombs they manufactured. Another Soviet film portrays the CIA as running the country and includes the foreboding line: “Presidents change. The CIA remains.”

The US and Soviet governments were barely talking to each other at the time. And there was a break in basic cultural and human connection. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US led a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics. All our allies fell in line—a major blow to Russian pride. They would retaliate with a boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

At the same time an anti-nuclear movement had been growing in the United States and Europe in reaction to the US plan to install intermediate-range Pershing II and cruise missiles, which were meant to counter Soviet SS-20 missiles and the Soviet superiority in tanks and troops. Military analysts made frightening predictions about how the Soviets could overrun Europe in a few days.

In 1984, I began a series of trips to the other side of the Iron Curtain. I made the first of what would be dozens of visits to Moscow for the Harvard-Soviet Joint Study on crisis prevention. I would stay in the Academy of Sciences hotel for research scholars—the *Akademicheskaya* Hotel on Leninsky Prospekt just beyond a huge statue of Yuri Gagarin, the first Soviet cosmonaut and the first human to orbit the earth. I had meetings with the top Soviet academicians, whose publications on foreign policy were simplistic propaganda tracts justifying the position of the Soviet regime. I had to read them all. The point was to find the one phrase, or one line, or the one paragraph, that signaled a change in the official position. This was part of the arcane art of Kremlinology that Condi Rice so wanted to avoid. A changed phrase in the ideological boilerplate could signal a new position in the approach and policy of the Soviet Politburo and Central Committee, just as a shift in the physical position of a top official, where he stood relative to the Party leader during a public gathering, could signal his ascent or downfall.

But you could learn much more from private conversations with the Soviets in the corridors and informal back-room chats than in the formal meetings and published writings. When our Harvard delegation came to Moscow, we would start our meetings no earlier than 10 a.m., with Soviet members arriving late and in no hurry to start the formal sessions because they knew it was just going through the motions. They were

waiting for our three-hour lunches to begin at 12:30, where vodka could smooth the way to dinnertime. This is where the real conversation began.

Once I understood this, I ceased to react when Soviet colleagues around our small table of only a dozen top-level scholars and former officials would at times be completely disengaged and converse among themselves while a Russian colleague was giving his scheduled formal presentation. I was assiduously taking notes, and the Russian behavior seemed terribly disrespectful to me at first. Yet, after a short time, I realized that in Soviet professional life the real conversation was always elsewhere.

After a few days of formal and informal meetings, our delegation would then travel to the US Embassy on Novinsky Bulvar on the Moscow Garden Ring Road and be escorted to the small acoustic meeting room in the Political Section—the soundproof “bubble” as it was called. There, in this hermetically sound-sealed space, we could speak freely, debriefing the American ambassador Arthur Hartmann about our corridor conversations.

Whenever I left the USSR, an extensive search awaited me at the border. The border guards searched all my suitcases, my briefcase, my coat. They would look at each tiny page of my yellow “Post-it” notes. The guard would deliberately look at a Post-it note, then turn and look me right in the eyes, then turn back and scrutinize the next Post-it, and turn again to look at me, and so on. They would take all the tapes from my dictaphone to a back room, copy them, and bring them back to me forty-five minutes later. It was the same routine every time I flew out of Sheremetievo Airport.

I was often with my colleague William Ury, who was a leading advocate of nuclear crisis control measures at the time. He had just published a book called *Beyond the Hotline*. I had met Bill the year before at the urging of Professor Dana Meadows, my mentor in college, who told me that “I had to meet” a young professor who had just co-authored the best-selling book on negotiation *Getting to Yes*. I met Bill and immediately started working for the Nuclear Negotiation Project he directed at the Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation, conducting research on Soviet views of the risk of nuclear crisis and accidental war.

*Beyond the Hotline* focused on the danger of crisis encounters in the human dimension, in the potential for events to escalate out of control beyond anyone’s intentions. The book identified four factors that contribute to runaway escalation: high stakes, pressing time constraints, great uncertainty, and apparently limited options. But the real danger lay in the fact that the actors might be uncertain as to the intentions of the other side and allow these factors to “warp” their decision-making so that seemingly rational acts could result in irrational and deadly outcomes.

Our little team at the Nuclear Negotiation Project worked wholeheartedly on how to prevent inadvertent war and to bring US and Soviet officials together to set up joint nuclear risk-reduction centers. The focus on inadvertent war seemed a “way in” to break through the wall of resistance in which the US-Soviet confrontation had been stuck, in a deadly stalemate, for five years. The focus on inadvertent war allowed us to work on improving US-Soviet relations in a nonthreatening way because we were focused on accidental, inadvertent war, in which, by definition, there is no one to blame, no evil motive to unmask. The approach we took focused the conflicting sides on shared interests, on a common problem. We cited the dangers of uncontrollable escalation in the Cuban Missile Crisis as our prime example.

Each December at our New Year's party at the Kennedy School, all the members of Harvard's humbly titled Avoiding Nuclear War Project would gather, and we would hear Professor Al Carnesale raise the same tongue-in-cheek toast: we could happily report to our supporters that our Project's goal had been achieved this year!

At that point it was impossible to imagine the sequence of events that would follow. As it turned out, the very first agreement that would be signed by President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev would be on the creation of nuclear risk-reduction centers. I would soon be living in Moscow for an entire year just as Gorbachev was beginning his reforms. I would then be appointed director of the Harvard Joint Study and develop close relationships with key Soviet reformers.

It was November 1984 when William Ury and I first arrived to Moscow for our very first three-week research visit for interviews and to agree with our Soviet partners on a plan for the first visit of the full American delegation to Moscow. It had taken a long time for us to get the official Soviet invitation and then, finally, the visas. I vividly recall that first time the plane landed at Sheremetievo Airport in Moscow. We had arrived on the other side of the Berlin Wall. Every sight and interaction on the other side was non-ordinary. It was exciting—like tasting some forbidden fruit. The chasm of conflict, the fantastic fears, had all created a sense of mystery. It lent suspense to the simplest act, to the people on the street, the buildings, to what would normally be ordinary.

We went to a welcome dinner with our hosts from the Academy of Sciences. There was lots of caviar, both black sturgeon and red salmon caviar, along with smoked sturgeon, horseradish, black bread, and a main course—all accompanied by Pepsi, Fanta, and vodka. A decade earlier, during the happier détente era, the CEO of Pepsi had managed to reach an agreement with the Soviet government to sell Pepsi products inside the Soviet Union and let the Soviets sell Stolichnaya vodka in the West. Here we always got the Pepsi (no Coke) together with the vodka. But the warm hospitality we were experiencing stood in contrast to an underlying feeling of constant constraint. There was always a “third person” at the table. We had to remember not to talk openly at the dinner table, in our hotel room or anywhere except when walking alone in the open air.

Our first meeting the next day was with Mr. Krestianov, the “scientific secretary” of the Institute of USA and Canada, who told us that he was completely pessimistic about our chance to have any significant meetings. Just entering his office you felt nervous tension and anxiety. No wonder: He was the KGB coordinator for Western visitors.

We then had a few organizational meetings. Two young researchers were assigned to accompany us throughout our official stay. We had a long dinner with our minders, who were legitimate researchers—but of course had special reporting duties and the associated benefits. They were eager to talk about the recent re-election of Ronald Reagan.

They drove us back to our hotel, where Bill and I talked and recorded some notes as the time crept past midnight. From our hotel window, we had a view of the electric tramway yards, a scene worthy of a “socialist realist” painting (“Socialist Realism” was art developed in the Soviet Union depicting the goals of socialism, extolling “liberation” of the worker and mass industrial development). It was dark, almost black, with dim yellow lights too weak to break the darkness. Steam was rising from



chimneys looming in the night, as the sound of wheels dragging over the aging tracks broke the midnight silence. Periodically a blue light would flash through the window and illuminate the room, created by flying sparks from the cold upper rails. It was now early morning, November 13, 1984.

That day we would have some important meetings. The first was with Fyodor Burlatsky, who had worked during the Khrushchev years as head of a group of liberal consultants reporting to Politburo member and future Soviet leader Yuri Andropov. That group included Georgy Arbatov, who was now leading the Soviet delegation for the Joint Study, and several others whom I would meet only later. They had all been part of a group of young reformers who played a part in the “first Russian Spring,” the political thaw that occurred in the early 1960s after Khrushchev denounced some of Stalin’s crimes. This group of reformers worked quietly inside the system, invisible to the West, and would play a critical role in the nonviolent collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

Burlatsky had been removed from his political position after Khrushchev’s ouster in 1964 but got a post with a leading Soviet newspaper, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and wrote some of the most open-minded and intelligent articles of the Soviet era. Burlatsky was a prime example of the few Soviet journalists who told a measure of truth, more than you could find anywhere else in the official media. He had learned how to say things without saying things, to editorialize by using allegories, inflections and humor. He could cast doubt on the official view without directly challenging it or risking being called disloyal. Burlatsky would do this by quoting Western views in his article, and going through the ritual criticisms of the West and capitalism, but still managing to point to a different point of view.

Some will say that to accept a position in the official state media in an undemocratic regime is a compromise of basic personal and journalistic integrity. But it is also a way to bring the truth into the circumstances where you are. Almost the entire Soviet population was dependent upon the state media, which had the power to shape the worldview of over two hundred million Soviet citizens. Burlatsky and others like him gave those millions at least some awareness of the outside world. They pushed people to think, to get beneath the conventional one-dimensional view offered in the Soviet state media. They chose to keep a voice, to use the power of the state media to engage in limited truth-telling *inside* the system rather than to exit and leave the official media to the sycophants and flatterers who would say anything to please the officials in power.

Burlatsky maintained his influence through a network of officials and former colleagues. He had been directly involved in writing Khrushchev’s speech to the Central Committee after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and he knew the inside details of how the crisis had nearly escalated out of control. He understood the dangers of inadvertent war. That day we realized that in Burlatsky we would have a helpful ally who would do what he could to advance our work to prevent inadvertent war.

Our next meeting would prove to be even more crucial to the project. It was with Yevgeny Primakov, the influential director of the Institute of Oriental Studies. Primakov had been a journalist in the Middle East whose honest reporting of what was occurring in Egypt in the 1960s had greatly impressed certain top leaders in the Kremlin. He became a conduit for important negotiations between the Kremlin and

Soviet allies in the Middle East. It was Primakov who would go to meet Saddam Hussein and try to persuade him to give up power before the US-led invasion of Iraq. Primakov was to be a key member of our Joint Study, and would later become a top Gorbachev advisor and then prime minister of Russia.

Primakov clearly understood that the world was a dangerous place, the uncontrollable elements rising, the potential for dangerous crisis hotspots in Iran growing, conflict between Israel and Syria ever more likely. Yes, on this he fully agreed. But when it came to what to do about it, he emphasized the importance of addressing restoring *détente*.<sup>7</sup> That was the conventional line, but what about accidental war, our supposed concern? In the end, Primakov came around to the idea that working on the prevention of accidental war and improving the relationship with the United States were not incompatible; the two could be pursued at the same time. “OK,” he said, “Let’s work on them simultaneously.” This struck us as genuine progress. In the course of the day, we had made another ally.

We woke up the next morning to a temperature of twenty below zero. We still wanted to take our morning run. We walked down Lenin Prospekt, past Muscovites scurrying across the wide boulevards on their way to work, fur hats and long boots insulating them against the deep freeze. We began our run in a snowy Gorky Park, past its gigantic Ferris wheel and several other archaic rides standing like prehistoric monuments to some bygone era of summer crowds and happy voices.

At 10:30, our run completed, we were driven to the Institute of USA and Canada to make a presentation on “The US Election Results and the Implications for Soviet-American Relations.” The researchers were eager to speak to us about the re-election of Reagan the week before. No Western newspapers were sold anywhere in the Soviet Union, and although the researchers received a special shipment of Western newspapers and journals through the KGB and the Foreign Ministry, it arrived ten to fifteen days late. They were all supposed to write reports on the USA but had little to go on. The Internet lay in the distant future.

Our opening talk lasted forty minutes, followed by a few stilted questions from the young researchers. They were like graduate students on the first day of class, frightened chickens asking absolutely predictable “questions” that were little more than attacks on US policy. Bill always used analogies and stories in his talks and had found a choice comparison to convey the core concept of common security in the nuclear age. The US and the Soviet Union were two mountain climbers perched high on a dangerous precipice and tied together by a single rope. If one fell, the other fell. They could only make the ascent together. “In Russia,” one researcher quickly interjected, “we have an old proverb that says: ‘wise people don’t climb mountains. They go around them.’” Not bad. The researchers were well prepared to show us how misguided our proposed crisis management measures were, even as they displayed their loyalty to the official party line and to the minders lurking in the back of the room.

Bill persisted. To show just how difficult it can be to overcome deep-seated and irrational conflicts, he related the fable about the scorpion that asked a frog to carry him across the river. Focusing us on the age-old Middle East conflict, he asked us to imagine the frog and the scorpion on the bank of the River Jordan. The frog is naturally afraid of being stung during the trip, but the scorpion argues: “If I were to

sting you, you would sink and we would both drown.” The frog accepts this altogether rational argument and invites the scorpion to cross the river on his back. But midway across the river the scorpion stings the frog, dooming them both. “But why?” asks the doomed frog. “It is my nature,” answers the scorpion.

A young researcher immediately informed Bill he had neglected to mention the Nile crocodile that lay at the river’s bottom ready to devour them both. The crocodile, he instructed us, was the arms race, ready to devour both the United States and Soviet Union. So the researchers were completely eager both to shoot down any optimism and trump us on pessimism.

Meeting afterwards with several of the senior researchers, and, having spent a couple hours that day talking about the American election and leadership, we asked them what they thought was in store for Soviet policy in the coming five years. They directed our attention to the leading *American* specialists in our delegation like Joe Nye at Harvard and Seweryn Bialer at Columbia. “That’s *their* job,” we were told.

We asked them about the fate of an outline of proposed measures that we had been discussing with the US side, which we had given to their delegation months before. They told us that the outline had been shared with officials in the Foreign Ministry and Party Central Committee. In his UN speech two months prior, in September 1984, President Reagan announced support for one of the proposals: meetings between defense ministers to exchange information. Reagan had also mentioned consultations on regional issues to “avoid miscalculation.” But, we were told, the Soviet side decided it was “not appropriate” to support the measures. Our Russian colleague told us frankly: “American acceptance is the kiss of death here and Soviet acceptance is the kiss of death there.” If one side accepted a proposed measure, it was *confirmation* to the other side that the other side must have some evil intent in accepting it. It was a relationship where even support was the kiss of death.

We had one more meeting with a Russian specialist who clearly wanted to impress us with his knowledge of English idiom. “And now,” he said as he leaned forward, “*I am speaking from my own shoes.*” He meant that he was going to speak candidly, give his own personal view, which I guess in his mind somehow contrasted with putting yourself in the other guy’s shoes.

There were plenty of mistakes in the terms of the art of international relations. One of my favorites was when a Soviet specialist spoke with great seriousness about the danger of “occasional” nuclear war. He obviously meant *accidental* nuclear war but mistranslated the Russian word *sluchainyi* because it has the same root as “occasion” or “incident.” In fact, over the next few years, I did hear someone translate the term as “incidental” nuclear war. There supposedly were more teachers of English in the Soviet Union at the time than students of Russian in America. But only a handful of these teachers had ever been abroad, so their English was typically heavily accented and their study focused on grammar and syntax rather than conversation.

I kept a running list of the most comical mistranslations I heard. Most often they made mistakes but still managed to convey their meaning. In particular, those Russians who tried to impress with their diction and vocabulary, with the best of intentions, created some marvelous linguistic innovations:

“—They want to have a *hedge* on the other side.” (an edge)

“—You should be humble and *self-erasing.*” (self-effacing)

Others less advanced in their English at times inadvertently created some awkward moments. I once introduced a Russian scholar to my American friend and his wife. “How do you do?” he said to my friend. And then, turning to her, he said: “And how do you do your wife?”

Later that evening Bill and I sat in the *Aragvi*, a Georgian restaurant that was Stalin’s favorite. It has huge vaulted ceilings with marble walls and painted murals covering the upper half with stories of knights and fair maidens, and a man wrestling a lion. We were drinking the best Georgian wine, reflecting on our efforts that day, following the principle we had agreed would guide our trip: “high aspirations and low expectations.” We could be pleased indeed that the meetings at the Institute that day promised to make us successful in realizing our low expectations. So we decided to have a time of it.

## The Russian Who Would Unlock the Door

There was one member of the Harvard-Soviet Joint Study with whom Bill and I began to develop a particularly close connection. It was Georgy Shakhnazarov, a Central Committee advisor. He had a wizened face, with oversized eyes. He was of Armenian descent. He actually looked like Yoda from the film *Star Wars*. He was extremely powerful in the Soviet political apparatus. This seemed strange to me, as he was a highly educated and soft-spoken, kind-hearted man. After our formal meetings, Bill and I would go see him at his office in the Central Committee building. We learned that he loved science fiction, so we brought him a copy of Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea Trilogy* and other Western novels. We would talk about history, science, politics, and about science fiction, fantasy, and the future.

At one of our delegation meetings in 1984, Shakhnazarov made a comment that I recorded and remember particularly: "...We have our Soviet logic. You Americans have your logic. Europeans have their logic. But, in the nuclear age, we must have one logic or none at all." In 1985, he published an article in the Soviet journal *Voprosy filosofii* (Questions of Philosophy) entitled "The Logic of Political Thinking in the Nuclear Age." He wrote that old ideas that had worked in the past were now "like a demagnetized compass" and that "strength had become weakness," and "murder had become suicide." Shakhnazarov asserted that "there is only one way to rid ourselves of this irrationality: ...to re-examine the habitual patterns of thought from the point of view of the logic of political thinking in the nuclear era."

As it turned out, Shakhnazarov was the close personal aide to a recently appointed Politburo member named Mikhail Gorbachev. When Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union a year later, I found Shakhnazarov's words in Gorbachev's speeches. In Gorbachev's dramatic autumn 1985 speech in Paris, when the world was just beginning to know him, he called on both the US and Soviet Union to change their "habitual ways of thinking" and find a new approach to overcome the nuclear confrontation.

The essence of the "new thinking" was that nuclear weapons, and the system of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), where each side sought security by threatening to destroy the other, were now forcing us to recognize our common humanity. It was as if fear for our own survival, fear of the other, of the enemy, had driven us to create an insane external defense mechanism that was now forcing us to do what we ourselves were afraid or unable to do—to break down the barriers and live in peace with each other. As Shakhnazarov had said the year before: "We must have one logic or none at all... Murder had become suicide." We could no longer eliminate those not like us without eliminating ourselves.

It was common sense that the weapons themselves were not the problem. At the time, Britain had enough nuclear warheads at the time to destroy every major US city. Yet few Americans were losing sleep over British weapons. This is plain common sense; yet the focus in the influential school of Sovietology was on the "guns and

bombs.” President Reagan had pursued a policy to deal with the “evil empire” based on massive expenditures on new weapons systems, particularly the Strategic Defense Initiative, an expensive space-based ballistic missile defense system that had been nicknamed the “Star Wars” program.

Yet Reagan’s attitude began to change with the ascent of Gorbachev. As a wise man once said: “The obvious is that which is never seen until someone expresses it simply.” I credit Ronald Reagan for stating the obvious very simply to the public in a speech in 1985: “Nations do not distrust each other because they are armed; they arm because they distrust each other.” So studying the guns and the bombs does not get to the heart of the problem. Reagan’s statement was an example of his famed simplicity of perception and communication at its best. It would foreshadow Reagan’s discarding of ideology in favor of realism and negotiation with Gorbachev.<sup>8</sup>

Habitual ways of thinking had indeed led us to major misperception in US-Soviet relations. The CIA’s “Team B” advocated views of Soviet strategy and ambitions that were almost all incorrect. Psychologists have long noted the human tendency to project one’s worst fears on one’s enemy, to see all their moves as rationally calculated acts against you. I remember one of our early delegation meetings in Moscow, when an American outlined the view among American hawks that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was part of a grand Soviet strategy to take control of oil in the Middle East, according to Lenin’s precepts, which the Soviet Union had pursued since the 1920s. One of the Soviets replied: “You know, when I hear that, it makes me proud!” As a Soviet insider, he knew that the Soviet regime could never achieve in reality the high level of rational implementation of long-term strategy described by American hawks. He knew that, in fact, Soviet decision-making was flawed, subject to personality conflicts and bureaucratic irrationality, just as it was in the West.

That the suspicious human mind can interpret any act as a calculated move against it is well exemplified by the story of the nineteenth century Prussian Foreign Minister who, upon hearing that the Russian ambassador had died, queried: “I wonder why he did that?”

It would be revealed later from archival sources that the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan was anything but a calculated move to gain control over Middle East oil. The decision to invade was made by a small group within the Politburo, reversing the initial decision not to send troops. The process was based on limited information, and poor-quality KGB sources rather than military intelligence. The analysis of Afghan society was largely blind to the realities of traditional Afghan tribal society and the role of Islam. The Soviet decision-making process was thus as imperfect as it was in the US government (with painful parallels to the US decision to invade Iraq); but Soviet decision-making was for the West a black box, and so many projected their worst fears and saw strategy where there was none. So the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, an event that so influenced American politics, and the graduate student Condi Rice, causing her to shift parties and dismiss “sentimentalism” in foreign policy, was, to put it mildly, badly misperceived. And, in politics, perception is reality until the facts come clear. The invasion of Afghanistan, as it turned out, was a disaster that had a massive negative influence on the Soviet population, discredited the Soviet Communist Party, and hastened the fall of Soviet power.

## Around the Cuban Missile Crisis Table in Moscow

Five years earlier, it was unimaginable. Yet I was now sitting at a table at a meeting in Moscow personally supported by the new reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. It had taken five years of meetings with Soviets to come to this point. We had brought science-fiction novels to an inspiring and—as it would turn out—politically powerful man, Georgy Shakhnazarov. We had arranged our joint meetings in places where we could get to know each other as people as well as do our work: we had our first meeting in the Florida Keys, where we swam with dolphins. At a later meeting we went fishing together on the Amur River in the Soviet Far East. We had begun to know and listen to each other, and to understand and write about the difficult dynamics of the US-Soviet confrontation. We had come to see the dysfunctional fear-driven patterns of thinking and behavior that made the very acceptance by the other side of a proposal a cause for suspicion and rejection.

Most importantly, we had come to experience together a great sense of *potential* for change. We had worked those years on a joint book called *Windows of Opportunity: From Cold War to Peaceful Competition in U.S.-Soviet Relations*.<sup>9</sup> There were chapters by American and Soviets, and comments on each by the other side. We were working to understand the point of view of the other side. We were rising to the challenges of a difficult change process, and building shared commitment.

We would later learn from one of our Soviet scholar colleagues that, soon after Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he would ask our partner institute at the Soviet Academy of Sciences for a brief on US-Soviet relations. Our Russian colleagues would later tell the story of how they prepared the standard ideological boilerplate using the terms like the “correlations of forces between Communism and Capitalism,” the inevitable victory of socialism, etc. When our partner Georgy Arbatov presented the brief to Gorbachev, he replied: “No, I don’t want this. I want you to tell me what is *really* going on.” At this point, they were given the materials from our Harvard exchange and they used them to prepare a completely new presentation to Gorbachev. It highlighted the danger of inadvertent war and the lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

It was in 1987 that we hatched the idea of holding a conference in Moscow to learn the lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The inspiration came from conversations with Georgy Shakhnazarov. My colleagues Jim Blight and David Welch had organized a meeting at Harvard on the 25th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, with Kennedy’s closest advisors, as part of the Harvard Avoiding Nuclear War Project. I arranged for Shakhnazarov to attend, along with Fyodor Burlatsky. By the end of our meeting, Shakhnazarov announced his support for the Moscow meeting.

As we worked to organize the Moscow meeting, Shakhnazarov would frequently joke that he could tolerate devoting time to what he called “the detective story,” the effort to uncover what really happened in the 1962 event, as long as we would keep focused on how to use the lessons of the past to advance his boss’s current agenda:



Gorbachev's new foreign policy—"new thinking in the nuclear age." Shakhnazarov was absolutely clear. He wanted to use the past to change the future.

At the meetings, we used an innovative scholarly method, "critical oral history," created by Jim Blight and Janet Lang. The method was to convene key participants in a major historical event, so they can give their oral testimony, together with top scholars familiar with the event and the documentary record, including recently declassified materials. As the inquiry proceeds, the testimony of the veteran policy-makers is checked against the documentary record and subject to critical questioning by the scholars.

In our Moscow meeting, we combined "critical oral history" with insights from the fields of conflict resolution and innovative dialogue. We used the method and techniques from the recently published *Getting to Yes*. Gorbachev would later keep the Russian translation in his office in the Kremlin.

A key part of our process was development of personal relationships with the key players. Jim, Janet, Dave and I would then have dozens of planning meetings with our Soviet partners, hundreds of personal conversations with them, and also with the key living veterans of the crisis. We were slowly building trust and commitment to the process. In the language of the now-popular field of large-scale social change processes, organizational learning and leadership studies, we were building what William Isaacs has called a "container" for transformative dialogue.<sup>10</sup> We were doing what he would later elaborate upon in a pioneering model of social change, which he had applied to large-scale organizations, both large companies and governments. The process begins with:

...a small group of "thoughtful, committed citizens" (as Margaret Mead famously put it) that gradually broadens in sponsorship and deepens in awareness. As the relationship between the core group of innovators and various allies becomes more vibrant, the organization's ability to sustain change becomes stronger. By the time the change initiative is extended throughout the company, the organization is ready to accept it.

In the early stages of such a process, it may seem like nothing much is happening, but, in fact, the groundwork is being laid for the change to take hold. By contrast, change initiatives that are rolled out within a month or two of their announcement generally end up failing because they haven't followed a deliberate sequence for building commitment among constituencies, establishing sponsors, and developing the capacity to act in new and different ways.<sup>11</sup>

Without our own fully articulated model of large-scale social change, we were doing something very similar to what was described above.

So when we began our meeting in Moscow, we had a core of sponsors and an already established atmosphere of trust and commitment to openness, new ways of thinking and acting. Our key allies Shakhnazarov and Primakov moderated the meeting on the Soviet side, and our senior American colleagues, who knew them for years, alternated with them and our new Cuban participants.

At our planning meeting prior to the Moscow meeting, we consciously applied key techniques of conflict resolution and mediation. We agreed that Bob McNamara would speak first, asking a question of the taciturn and old school Gromyko, who knew more than anyone in the room.

I would later learn that Gromyko had been forced to come to our meeting by Gorbachev himself. Andrei Gromyko was the man sent by Stalin to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC, in 1939, the indispensable advisor to Stalin, Khrushchev



and Brezhnev, now eased up to the ceremonial post of president by Gorbachev. The legendary Gromyko now had to follow the orders of the younger man.

Gromyko was a man of extraordinary discipline. He was a Russian who did not drink. He outlived almost all the world leaders with whom he negotiated. He had been present at the creation of United Nations, and never missed a General Assembly meeting. He had a reputation for exceptional competence; he had command of every detail. Henry Kissinger once said, “If you can face Gromyko for one hour and survive, then you can begin to call yourself a diplomat.” Gromyko was ideological, confrontational, the legendary “Mr. Nyet.” So it was a surprise when the world learned that Gromyko had supported the young Gorbachev to become the new Soviet leader at the closed midnight meeting of the Central Committee after the death of the previous elderly Soviet leader, Konstantin Chernenko, in March 1985. Years later Gromyko’s son revealed that his father, before he died, expressed regret that he had given his decisive support to Gorbachev. He had supported a man who would let the Berlin Wall fall, who would refuse to use force to prevent the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the empire that Gromyko had served all his life.

McNamara was also a man of almost superhuman discipline and competence. President Lyndon Johnson said of McNamara: “He’s like a jackhammer. No human being can take what he takes. He drives too hard. He is too perfect.”

I spent countless hours over five years in private planning sessions and meetings with McNamara and he was always utterly lucid, his steel-trap analytical mind always working. He never wasted a moment. He worked longer hours than any of us, decades younger than he. It was clear to me that he liked to bring himself back to relive the 1962 missile crisis. It was for him a success before the disaster that would become his personal nightmare, haunting him to the end of his life—Vietnam. McNamara had sent 500,000 American soldiers to war, and 58,000 American soldiers were killed. As many as three million Vietnamese died. In the US, it was referred to as “McNamara’s war.” His own son had refused to talk to him, becoming an antiwar protester at Stanford.

In Moscow in 1989, McNamara had found a context in which he could apply the lessons he had learned not only from the missile crisis, but also from the agony of Vietnam—and he did not ever have to utter the painful word. I was told he would not say a word about Vietnam and I never once heard him refer to it even obliquely. (He kept his silence on Vietnam for 27 years.) Yet he repeated again and again the lesson that you must see conflict through eyes of your opponent. It was a lesson indelibly imprinted in his psyche from the slip to the brink during the “thirteen days” in 1962. But it was also the haunting lesson from years of bombing and death in Vietnam. Only later would he say publicly that the American failure in Vietnam was seeing the enemy through the prism of the Cold War, seeing Vietnam as a “domino” that would topple the surrounding nations in Asia if it fell. In his later years, he would repeat like a mantra that you must know your opponents, how they think, and be able to empathize with them.

As we began our Moscow meeting that morning, McNamara would indeed be the first to speak and he would make a surprisingly candid statement about the importance of understanding the point of view of the other side. He would put himself in the shoes of the Cubans. As Shakhnazarov gave McNamara the floor, I drew a deep breath and waited apprehensively:

McNamara: My first question is a very obvious one, from our point of view. What was the purpose of the deployment of nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba by the Soviet Union?

Gromyko: This action was intended to strengthen the defensive capability of Cuba. To counter the threats against it. I repeat, to strengthen the defensive capabilities of Cuba. That is all.

This was not a good start. Gromyko had given a predictable terse, unhelpful answer. It gave no evidence of progress. In fact, it was *exactly* the same phrase Gromyko had uttered to President Kennedy in a tense White House meeting on October 18, 1962, when Kennedy summoned Gromyko to his office, four days after the American U-2 had obtained photographic proof of the missile sites in Cuba. Though Kennedy did not reveal them to Gromyko at the meeting, he had the aerial reconnaissance photos of the missiles right there, in his top desk drawer. Gromyko persisted in his claim that the Soviet Union would not install “offensive” weapons in Cuba. In his dramatic speech to the nation a few days later, on October 22nd, Kennedy said “Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko told me in my office that he was instructed to make it clear once again, as he said his government had already done, that Soviet assistance to Cuba, and I quote, ‘pursued solely the purpose of contributing to the defense capabilities of Cuba.’” Kennedy baldly said: “That statement was false.”

In the silence that followed that first tense exchange around the table in Moscow in 1989, Gromyko looked like the last place he wanted to be was at our meeting. For Gromyko, forced to respond to questions from McNamara, he must have relived that moment when he attempted to deceive the US president twenty-seven years earlier, after which Kennedy called him a liar before the entire world. Gromyko had the look of a man who felt he was again being brought to public trial. It looked like it could be a very long couple days.

Then McNamara made an intervention that completely shifted the dynamic of the meeting. He gave Gromyko some breathing room by making it clear why Cuba might in fact have had valid reasons to strengthen its defensive capability.

McNamara: If I had been a Cuban, I think I might have thought that the US intended to invade Cuba.... One of the most important lessons of this event is that we must look at ourselves from the point of view of others. And I want to state quite frankly that with hindsight, if I had been a Cuban leader, I think I might have expected a US invasion. Why? Because the US had carried out what I have referred publicly to as a debacle—the Bay of Pigs invasion... we had supported it.

McNamara then went on to acknowledge the US covert operations against Cuba, and the fact that some members of the US Congress had been calling for an invasion of Cuba. All this had been publicly known for decades, but the fact that *it was Bob McNamara saying it face to face to Andrei Gromyko and Cubans* gave it great impact on all present. It immediately opened up the dialogue. Cuban Politburo member Jorge Risquet said he was “amazed” at McNamara’s frankness. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Komlektov said he was “impressed” by McNamara’s words. The intervention was critical to the success of the conference.

And so I would later develop a “Three-Level Framework” for conflict transformation, with “Level One” being simply to assist the parties to see the perspective of the other side. The scarcest commodity in conflict is listening. As I have witnessed in dozens of mediation sessions with conflicting parties, the necessary first step is to help the sides step back from judgment and condemnation and listen to each

other and begin to see the other's perspective. This simple necessity is often not easy. William Ury likes to remind the conflicting parties: "There is a reason that God gave us two ears and only one mouth." This always brings a pause and general laughter. It helps those caught in conflict to step back and begin to listen.

This truth is reflected in the folk wisdom of many cultures, including an old Lakota Sioux proverb: "Don't judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins." For Native Americans, "two moons" signified two months, about enough time to listen, to walk the land and become familiar with an area and to understand how another person lives. Only then might you be in position to comment on that person. The value in outside intervention is to assist the two sides to see the perspective of the other, slow the rush to judgment, and enable the conflicting parties to step back from the brink of violence. (I have also encountered the point of view that saw a different utility in "walking a mile in the moccasins" of someone with whom you have a disagreement, the way the proverb is often rendered: "That way, you're a mile away from him, and you've got his shoes.")

McNamara's opening frank admission, acknowledging how the Cubans viewed the situation, was the beginning of a dialogue in which we would move together from three views of three "different" events to a single three-dimensional view of the 1962 crisis. After our Cuban missile project, when McNamara decided to confront the trauma of Vietnam, he would elaborate on the lesson he learned on the need to know one's opponent and understand his point of view: "What went wrong was a basic misunderstanding or misevaluation of the threat to our security represented by the North Vietnamese. It led President Eisenhower in 1954 to say that if Vietnam were lost, or if Laos and Vietnam were lost, the dominoes would fall." He continued, "I am certain we exaggerated the threat." "We didn't know our opposition," he said. "We didn't understand the Chinese; we didn't understand the Vietnamese, particularly the North Vietnamese. So the first lesson is know your opponents. I want to suggest to you that we don't know our potential opponents today."

So McNamara's lesson about the critical need to see the perspective of the opponent got us off to a good start in achieving "Level One" in our meeting. The three sides were listening and able to see the others' point of view. In the course of the meeting, we would go much further, to what I call "Level Two" and "Level Three" of conflict transformation.

## Moving Beyond the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Caribbean Crisis, the October Crisis

It was a most electrifying revelation that came at an unlikely moment. It showed as never before how close we came to nuclear holocaust in 1962—and the former US Secretary of Defense would be the one to leak the revelation to the press! We were just breaking for lunch after the first morning session. We moved to the dining hall where several small tables of four were set. I sat down with Sergei Khrushchev and William Ury. I later learned that it was our colleague Yevgeny Primakov who had, with Gorbachev's approval, called Sergei to invite him to the meeting. Sergei had been kept out of the public eye since his father's ouster in 1964. He had earned his Ph.D. from Moscow Technical University and was now the first deputy director of the Control Computer Institute in Moscow. He had been in charge of research on missile guidance systems and rocket design. He had worked on cruise missiles for submarines, military and research spacecraft, moon vehicles, and the "Proton" space booster. Sergei's appearance at our meeting was his first official contact with an American group in thirty years. The world knew of Sergei primarily from the famous trip his father had made to the United States in 1959. Sergei had accompanied his father as he did on many previous trips—to Britain, to Indonesia (where he was able to indulge his passion for collecting butterflies). Washington Post journalist Peter Carlson has described Sergei when he arrived in America: "At twenty-five, he was a thin, handsome man with his blond hair combed straight back." He tells the story of how Sergei persisted in asking permission from the State Department to visit a location off limits to Soviets. They finally relented and let him travel to visit a shop he had read about. With a crowd of reporters and photographers, Sergei travelled to East Flatbush in Brooklyn, where he visited the Butterfly Art Jewelry shop. The owner, Aminadov Glantz, showed him "flocks of butterflies, pinned and framed, [which] filled the shop walls to the ceiling, each bearing a price tag." But Sergei had never *purchased* a butterfly. He had always *traded* butterflies with other collectors, and could not fathom the idea of *paying* for butterflies. Glantz graciously gave Sergei some excellent butterflies with no capitalist exchange of money, no profit for his labor running a small private business in East Flatbush. Sergei would later send Glantz a shipment of butterflies, collected with the help of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, and delivered through the good offices of Andrei Gromyko.

As we sat down, Bob McNamara joined us, taking the fourth chair. We started to talk about the morning sessions. As usual, McNamara was lucid, laser focused, in pursuing questions with Sergei over Russian beet salad, smoked sturgeon sandwiches and bottles of Pepsi labeled in Cyrillic. He was like a jackhammer, sitting with Sergei Khrushchev, hammering away.

This focused and unceasingly driven man, already in his seventies, would live another twenty years, dying in his sleep in 2009 at the age of 93. In his final years, McNamara would do a series of revealing interviews for an extraordinary

documentary film, *The Fog of War*. He would talk about his life, even the most terrible parts, such as the supporting role he had played in the American firebombing of Japan's cities in World War II. He ran statistical analysis for Gen. Curtis E. LeMay of the Air Force. He frankly admitted: "We burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo—men, women and children." Over 900,000 Japanese civilians died in all. "LeMay said, 'If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals.' And I think he's right. He—and I'd say I—were behaving as war criminals.... What makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?"

Such questions lived in the heart and mind of this man sitting with us at our table for four. He would later write in his memoir about those areas that were still repressed when we sat with him in Moscow. He would admit that the war in Vietnam "was wrong, terribly wrong." But this was still some time before McNamara would publicly come to terms with that nightmare. In Moscow in 1989, sitting with us, he could focus on his success, on the Cuban Missile Crisis. He was visibly happy. He enjoyed it. He could dwell on a segment of his life where he had no guilt; just victory, lessons to share, an affirmation of life.

We carried on with our conversation and our lunch. At a moment when the conversation paused for a second, as we were finishing our meal, Sergei leaned forward and quietly said: "I just wanted you to know that Castro wanted to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the US. He sent a cable to my father on Saturday the 27th of October when it appeared that you Americans were going to invade Cuba. My father described his total shock to me and I have his words in his secret memoirs. But I cannot say it publicly. This is for you alone to know." We all fell silent. It was a bombshell. No one knew what to say. Taken aback, we couldn't even come up with questions. We looked at him, nodded, and then the conversation moved on—as if nothing had been said of consequence. Time to go back to the conference session.

The next morning, Bill Keller, later the editor but back then Moscow correspondent for *The New York Times*, arrived and told me—imagine my shock—that he wanted to talk to Sergei Khrushchev about Castro and his call for a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the US. How on earth did he know?

Bill Ury affirmed that he had said nothing. Not to anyone. I certainly hadn't. The only other person at the lunch table was... McNamara? McNamara had talked? He later admitted he had told Pierre Salinger, also at the conference. Salinger had been President Kennedy's press secretary during the crisis, and it was Salinger who had relayed what Bob told him to the press. It was just too important not to put on the public record, was his excuse. Salinger had his own agenda, as it turned out. And he would write his own articles about our meeting, taking issue with McNamara on several points, including his assertion that the US had no intention to invade Cuba before the missile crisis.

I waited for Sergei before that day's conference opening. As soon as he arrived, Sergei was besieged by Western reporters. Could he confirm that Castro had called for a pre-emptive nuclear strike? Stunned and distressed, Sergei could only reply: "There was misunderstanding. You know, my English not so good." He was backed up immediately by Yevgeny Primakov, now a member of the all-powerful Soviet Politburo, who, at a quickly called press conference, insisted it was not true that Castro had called for a pre-emptive nuclear strike.

It was extremely tense. Why would Sergei say such a thing if it was not true? He seemed a very direct and genuine person. He obviously thought that he could trust the three of us at the lunch table. Well he could trust two of us, as things turned out. Sergei said nothing further and the next conference session started.

On the Monday morning after our conference, Bill Keller published an article<sup>12</sup> in *The New York Times* about Castro's call for a pre-emptive nuclear strike that a few days earlier had been our secret:

Leading figures in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis ended an unusual meeting here this weekend having resolved some of the mysteries about that autumn of nuclear brinksmanship, but having added at least one puzzle: Did Fidel Castro urge Nikita S. Khrushchev to fire nuclear weapons at the United States?

The story that he did arose in a Moscow conference center, where high-level American, Soviet and Cuban veterans of the crisis were brought face to face for the first time.

The story about Mr. Castro was the most electrifying speculation to arise at the gathering. It circulated widely among conference participants and found its way into a few Western news reports. Today it was firmly denied by Moscow's former ambassador to Havana—but not totally disbelieved by American participants.

It began with a few Americans, who said they heard it Saturday in a conversation with a well-informed Soviet conference participant. The Americans retold the account on the condition that neither they nor the Soviet be identified, but it soon became generally known that the Soviet was Sergei N. Khrushchev, the son of the Soviet leader who faced off against President John F. Kennedy over Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba.

The Americans said Sergei Khrushchev had recounted his father's alarm upon receiving a message from Mr. Castro on Oct. 26, 1962, at the peak of tension. Mr. Castro's message was said to call an American invasion of the island imminent, and urged that the Soviets fire their missiles.

I particularly loved the phrase: "The Americans retold the account on the condition that neither they nor the Soviet be identified." Always the careful reporter, Keller did not reveal his source. By this time I no longer knew what the truth was.

I stayed in Moscow a few days after the conference ended. Sergei invited me to come and meet with him and his wife, Valya, at their home. He gave me copies of various Soviet journal articles, and he offered to let me have a couple of photocopies of pages from his father's uncensored memoirs, which Sergei himself had recorded fifteen years earlier while sitting with his father, then a mere Soviet "pensioner," at his two-story dacha overlooking the Moscow River, hidden in a grove of pine trees. A censored version had appeared in the West in 1970, edited by Strobe Talbot. But the full, uncensored version had remained a secret. Sergei showed me about five pages with interesting, supportive details about points we had discussed at the conference. Though there seemed to be nothing of major importance for my research, we had no further discussion about what had transpired at the conference. I was excited to have access to these uncensored pages.

When I returned to my hotel, I immediately grabbed the materials out of my briefcase and started reading. I went through the photocopies of articles, the pages from the memoirs, and then my eyes fell on a page I had not seen at Sergei's house. I read it. And gasped. It was the text of Nikita's Khrushchev's uncensored memoirs from Saturday, October 27, 1962, confirming exactly what Sergei had reported to us over lunch, that Fidel Castro had that day called on the Soviet Union to be the first to fire nuclear weapons, to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike on the United States, if US troops invaded Cuba:

If [the imperialists] actually carry out the brutal act of invading Cuba in violation of international law and morality, that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear and legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other.

I read it again. And, unable to believe what was on the page, still again. Sergei had spoken the truth to McNamara, Bill Ury, and me at the lunch table. And he had slipped me the actual page from his father's uncensored memoirs! Or had he? Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe the copy was just there on the table, and found its way into the papers he gave me. What should I do?

Go right back to Sergei and return it? Salinger had acted without concern for the disclosure's impact on Sergei, and Sergei had been forced to deny it all at the press conference. Could I now risk putting him in jeopardy again? But how could I go back and say, "Oh, I think you gave this stunning revelation to me by mistake!"?

Best to do nothing, just hide it. Forget about it. After all, I didn't really know if Sergei had actually intended to give it to me or not.

The next day I had to leave Moscow. I made the decision to take the page with me. I hid it as best I could in the gift wrapping for a souvenir in my suitcase. And I made it through Soviet border control—no search! I was there as an official guest of the Soviet government, so customs officials had likely been instructed not to do anything to hassle me.

Back at the Kennedy School, I showed the page to colleagues, and we decided to share it privately with a few key individuals and officials, who passed it on higher up. I then decided to include the quote, tucked away in a footnote, without citing Sergei or the memoirs as the source, in an article in the journal *International Security*, to be published in a few months. It would be proof to the foreign policy elite, those in the know, that Castro really had called for a pre-emptive nuclear strike.

Fortunately, Gorbachev's team and the policy of *glasnost* ensured that there were no untoward consequences for Sergei, who was committed to take the risk to tell the truth about what was contained in his father's memoirs. Sergei was honoring the promise he made to his father to ensure that his story, the complete memoirs he dictated after his ouster from power, under constant surveillance from the KGB, would reach the world.

Sergei would later share additional excerpts from the secret memoirs where his father reacted to Castro's message, proving his father's utter shock: "Is he proposing that we start a nuclear war? This is insane. We deployed missiles there to prevent an attack on the island, to save Cuba and defend socialism. And now not only is he preparing to die himself, he wants to drag us with him. Only lunatics or suicides, who themselves want to perish and to destroy the whole world before they die, could do this." Khrushchev was no more anxious to stumble into war than Kennedy, and now we knew *why* he had raced to broadcast over open radio the removal of the missiles from Cuba. He had just read Castro's cable.

My colleagues and I later published the full text of the official cables exchanged between Khrushchev and Castro.<sup>13</sup> In his official response, Khrushchev would reply to Castro more diplomatically, not directly calling him a lunatic, but implying as much:

In your cable of October 27, you proposed that we be the first to launch a nuclear strike against the territory of the enemy. You, of course, realize where that would have led. Rather than a simple strike, it would have been the start of a thermonuclear world war.

Dear Comrade Fidel Castro, I consider this proposal of yours incorrect, although I understand your motivation.

We have lived through the most serious moment when a nuclear world war could have broken out. Obviously, in that case, the United States would have sustained huge losses, but the Soviet Union and the whole socialist camp would have also suffered greatly. As far as Cuba is concerned, it would be difficult to say even in general terms what this would have meant.... In the first place, Cuba would have been burned in the fire of war. There is no doubt that the Cuban people would have fought courageously or that they would have died heroically. But we are not struggling against imperialism in order to die, but to take advantage of all our possibilities, to lose less in the struggle and win more to overcome and achieve the victory of communism.

Nikita Khrushchev stepped back from the brink, took a larger perspective and saw what was at stake for the human community. He realized that the situation he had created was completely spinning out of control, and he chose to broadcast his decision to remove the missiles immediately over open radio, not even taking time to inform Castro in advance, for which Castro remained furious for decades afterwards. At that moment, Kennedy was in fact under huge pressure to launch a strike against the missile sites, and the Pentagon had been developing contingency plans to invade Cuba for some time. Had Khrushchev not acted immediately, the US might have taken military action, and, unbeknownst to the Kennedy administration at the time, the Soviets had not only medium-range-nuclear warheads, but also tactical nuclear warheads that could have been used against American troops as they landed in Cuba. It was only at our meeting in Havana in 1992 that the full extent of this dramatic new danger was revealed.

When we did hold our final retrospective meeting with Castro himself in Havana in 1992, Fidel would speak at length in response to a question I asked about that critical day of Saturday, October 27, 1962. Castro would say that he had been misunderstood, that his letter to Khrushchev was designed with a different intention, not to call for a first nuclear strike. But we will come to that story a little later.

Years later, Sergei told me he had given me the copy of the critical page from the memoirs deliberately. He wanted to show the American delegation how close to catastrophe the world had come, that he possessed the documentary evidence for the near disaster in his original copy of his father's uncensored memoirs. At the time, in early 1989, he was still trying to get Soviet authorities to legalize publication of his copy of the memoirs. The KGB had taken the original tapes and dictation from him and never given them back. No matter. Sergei had taken full note of advice from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. It was the famous dissident's advice, Sergei told me, to always to keep a couple of copies of your manuscript hidden. Spread them around in several locations. Sergei had arranged for a Soviet general in Stalingrad to keep a copy of his father's memoirs above the toilet in his apartment.

In 1999, keeping his promise to his father, Sergei would finally publish the full, uncensored version of Khrushchev's memoirs. And he would disclose the full story about how the censored version of the memoirs was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published abroad in 1970. He had collaborated with Victor Louis, a Russian journalist and alleged associate of the KGB, who conveyed the censored memoirs to Jerrold Schecter, the Moscow bureau chief of *Time* magazine. When asked why the KGB did not harass him, Sergei replied: "Someone was protecting us." That someone, I gleaned from hints given in conversation with several other people, was probably KGB head and future Soviet leader Yuri Andropov. Which brings me to the story of



Khrushchev's shoe—a story in which Sergei again played a mediating role.

After the Moscow meeting, I arranged for Sergei to come to Harvard in April, his first trip to the US since 1959. But just three days before departure, he had not received his visa. Someone in the KGB was holding it back. Sergei called Gorbachev's office and spoke with Georgy Shakhnazarov, who resolutely replied: "That fellow should *not* have had *any* power to deny you a visa." Within fifteen minutes, Sergei received a call back from Shakhnazarov's office: He would get a visa that very day! But some officials at the Soviet Foreign Ministry were still betting a bottle of cognac on whether Sergei would get the visa by midnight.

Sergei did get his visa, and I met him at Logan Airport in Boston a few days later. He was to speak at the Kennedy School Forum the next night; I would do simultaneous translation. The Forum was packed, with national television cameras, top scholars in the field, and an overflow crowd of students. Kennedy School Dean Graham Allison introduced Sergei. He and I stepped to the microphone. Just as Sergei opened his mouth to speak, a large man in the audience jumped up, raised a shoe above his head, and shouted: "Khrushchev wants to bury you! Khrushchev wants to bury you!" The man then charged toward Sergei and me at the podium, brandishing the shoe. Harvard security guards intercepted the fellow. Good thing too, since the aggressor appeared to be about six foot five and 250 pounds.

I tried to explain to Sergei at the podium, whispering in Russian, that this enormous guy was probably some kind of extremist, don't worry, these kind of things happen in America, that he was no doubt an isolated figure, nothing to fear, we could proceed. (We later learned the man was a supporter of political extremist and presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche).

Sergei turned to the microphone, the crowd hushed, and he improvised: "*Ved ya zhe ne priekhal siuda chtoby govorit o tuflakh! No ya mogu esli khotitye.*" I translated: "You know, I did not come here to talk about *shoes*... but I can if you want." The audience broke into laughter, and the rest of the evening went without incident. Sergei gave a wonderful talk about his father and the crisis. Even two years before, we never could have imagined we would be listening to Khrushchev's son tell us directly of his father and his role in the most critical moments of the most dangerous crisis in history.

The extremist who rushed at Sergei and me at Harvard had reopened an old story, but one that teaches some of the same lessons about how history really gets written, as I had learned from Sergei's revelations about what had *really* happened during the missile crisis. As I learned, and as just a few days later *The New York Times* editorial board learned from Sergei, there was indeed a story behind how his father had come to bang his shoe at his delegate desk at the UN in 1960, and it was NOT the story widely reported in the press. The truth about it remained a running question, and one of the editors asked Sergei if he could tell us what happened. Even Sir Brian Urquhart, the former UN Under Secretary General, had wondered whether Khrushchev "used one of his own shoes, borrowed one of Gromyko's, or kept an extra shoe in his briefcase for banging purposes."

Sergei solved the mystery and set the standard media account to rest: His father did not intentionally take off his shoe in order to pound it on the table when trying to put down a verbal attack on the Soviet Union. The truth was more serendipitous—and embarrassing—even if the outcome was the same. When his father had entered the UN

Assembly Hall, he was surrounded by journalists, and one of them stepped on his heel, disengaging Khrushchev from his slip-on shoe. Self-consciously overweight, Khrushchev did not want to re-engage the missing shoe in full view of the cameras. So he went to his desk semi-shoeless while a UN staffer retrieved the loafer, wrapped it in a napkin, and put it discretely on his desk.

At this point a Philippine delegate said that the Soviet Union had “swallowed up” Eastern Europe, and “deprived it of political and civil rights,” causing an uproar in the hall. The Soviet-allied Romanian delegate jumped to his feet and began shouting at his Philippine colleague. Khrushchev knew he had to take the floor, but the Irish delegate who chaired the meeting failed to see and recognize him. Khrushchev raised one hand, then another, and finally took the shoe lying conveniently in front of him and waved it. Then, Sergei concluded happily, “my father banged it on the desk and this definitely helped.”

On the Internet, you can find doctored, completely fake photos that show an angry Khrushchev raising a shoe in his hand over his UN delegate desk. The actual event was *never* filmed by US television. But it was in fact filmed by German television, and that footage confirms Sergei’s account, clearly showing Khrushchev trying to get the attention of the chairman, standing, raising an arm, then both arms. But the chairman, on the other side of the hall, was not looking in his direction either unable or refusing to see him. It was only at this moment that Khrushchev, picking up the shoe and raising it in his hand, “pounded” it on his desk—quite gently really, it sounded more like a kind of loud tapping—and so finally he was recognized by the chair.

When Khrushchev did reach the podium, and was given chance to comment as a point of order, he spoke with great pathos, lifting his hand repeatedly above his head, saying that you “cannot silence” the voice of the people and that the minority “will be heard.”

Such is the true and all-too-human explanation of the circumstances behind the notorious international shoe-banging incident. The image of Khrushchev as a hotheaded, menacing and threatening Soviet leader would be propagated around the world. It all might have been different if the journalist had not stepped on the heel of the Soviet leader’s shoe that day, or if Nikita Khrushchev had lost some excess weight before coming to the UN. Decades later, the most frequent question asked of UN tour guides is: “Where was Khrushchev sitting when he pounded his shoe?”

And the famous phrase “We will bury you,” used by the extremist who brandished the shoe at Sergei and me at the Harvard Forum, was also the product of bad translation and distortion. The actual Russian phrase that Khrushchev used in a speech in 1958 was taken out of context. In the speech, Khrushchev was spouting the Marxist dogma that “History is on our side,” using a phrase that actually meant “We will *outlast* you.” (“We will be around when you are buried.”) It is just one more example of how negative stereotypes are created and reinforced. (One wonders what mistranslations we are now making in Arabic or Farsi?)

Of course, there was a real basis in Khrushchev’s behavior for the stereotype. He had total disregard for convention, was often highly emotional, using “colorful” language like “we are turning out nuclear missiles like sausages” (a claim used in the West to reinforce the supposed “missile gap” between the US and Soviet Union under President Eisenhower when in fact the US had many times more nuclear missiles).

And Khrushchev loved to taunt. He made at least one perilously high-risk gamble, secretly putting missiles in Cuba, telling his inner circle that he would “use Cuba to throw a hedgehog in Uncle Sam’s pants.”

Sergei Khrushchev would later become a resident scholar at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. After the Soviet Union collapsed, his former country was gone, and the university invited him to undertake a major writing project about his father. So it made sense for Sergei to acquire US residency and citizenship. Ironically, Sergei would be the only one in an *American* delegation to be denied a visa to the 40th anniversary conference of the Cuban Missile Crisis held in Cuba in 2002. We do not know for certain what was the reason. Fidel Castro may not have been happy with Sergei’s views on the missile crisis. Castro had argued that Nikita Khrushchev erred in his decision to try to install the missiles clandestinely, contending that the Soviet Union should have *publicly* announced the plan before proceeding. But Sergei was on record defending the alternative view. Those questions now seem academic. Yet we can only wonder today: Who could have imagined back in 1962 that, forty years later, *the Soviet Union would be gone, Castro would still be there*, and the head of state who had threatened nuclear war would deny a visa to an *American* by the name of Sergei Khrushchev!

Back for the second day of our 1989 meeting, we would see everyone relax to a new level and engage in a truly candid and free-wheeling dialogue. A key moment was when we touched a deeply personal element involving former Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. During the Cold War, the Soviet ambassador was the most important foreign diplomat in Washington. This was for obvious reasons. As former Secretary of State George Schulz put it, the Soviet Union could “wipe us out in thirty minutes.” In 1962, Dobrynin served as Foreign Minister Gromyko’s right hand man. He had just arrived in Washington, the youngest Soviet ambassador ever to serve in the United States. During the missile crisis, many of Kennedy’s inner circle believed that Dobrynin had engaged in deliberate deception by denying that there were any offensive weapons in Cuba. Dobrynin was the key interlocutor in a series of secret “back channel” meetings with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the president’s brother. Their conversations would ultimately be critical to resolving the crisis. Kennedy’s men believed that Dobrynin, as the Soviet ambassador to Washington, must have been part aware of the clandestine missile installation. For decades, Dobrynin had to live with the assertion in American books on the crisis that he had lied to Kennedy.

And so, well into our meeting in Moscow, Dobrynin with great emotion finally told McNamara, Bundy, and Sorensen sitting at the table that *he did not know* that his own country had put missiles in Cuba. Dobrynin obviously was not sure that Kennedy’s men were going to believe him, but he quickly got support from someone who was sure to be believed by all those present.

Dobrynin: Sometimes when an ambassador is abroad, he is not told everything. For example, I was not informed until the very last minute about the missiles in Cuba.

Gromyko: What, Anatoly Fyodorovich? Do you mean that I did not tell you, the ambassador, about the nuclear missiles in Cuba?

Dobrynin: *No, you did not.*

Gromyko: That means it must have been a very big secret!

The normally dour Gromyko then let out a big belly laugh. No one recalled ever hearing of a situation where the taciturn Gromyko, the legendary “Mr. Nyet,” laughed quite so loudly and with such apparent abandonment, let alone in a forum with Americans. He continued jovially to tell more stories, becoming like a child unable to restrain himself.

Gromyko: [Turning back to Dobrynin] You would not have been able to find out, most likely. I remember my discussion during the UN General Assembly in September with Comrade Dorticos [who was then president of Cuba and a member of the ruling 6-man Secretariat]. Of course, he knew and I knew [laughing] what those things [*stuchki*] were and where they were located. The nuclear missiles. We were staying in an American hotel [chuckling] and we began to exchange views.

Do you know how he and I conducted the negotiations? I took a piece of paper and wrote something on it, and handed it to him. Then he tore off a piece of paper and wrote something on it and passed it over to me. So we passed these pieces of paper back and forth... [still smiling and laughing]

Do not be offended, Anatoly Fyodorovich, that you were not quite in the know about everything!

The head of the Cuban delegation then quipped: “You believed there were microphones in an American hotel?!” Gromyko responded that it was clear without further answer, to general laughter around the table.

By the second day, we had created an atmosphere where normally stiff personalities could relax and begin to be themselves. Gromyko then went on to talk candidly about the Soviet blockade of Berlin and Nikita Khrushchev, and concluded by saying that people will repeatedly return to the 1962 crisis to “take a sober position,” one that corresponds to the larger “interests of the world.”

On that day, after decades, Dobrynin finally had a chance to clear his name. This confirmed what US Secretary of State Dean Rusk witnessed when he informed Dobrynin that missiles had been discovered in Cuba: “I saw him age ten years right in front of my eyes.”

After our Moscow meeting, I would visit Dobrynin several times in his apartment, having tea with him and his wife, Irina, in a building for the diplomatic elite near The Arbat in central Moscow. He was a man no longer taking orders from Andrei Gromyko, but actively making foreign policy with Gorbachev’s Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. He was now much more important than his decades-long boss Gromyko.

Dobrynin had remained shocked for years by the way he had been deceived by his own government about the missiles in Cuba. In his memoirs, he would write that, before he was sent to Washington, Khrushchev himself had “plainly told me that I should always bear in mind that war with the United States was inadmissible.” Yet within months Khrushchev had secretly placed missiles in Cuba. Dobrynin was completely blindsided—mentally and emotionally. And for decades afterwards, even as Dobrynin subsequently developed his reputation as a charming, urbane, and trustworthy interlocutor, a critical “back channel” not only during the missile crisis but during Nixon’s presidency and beyond, a man who played chess with Zbigniew Brzezinski and earned praise from Ronald Reagan (“Dobrynin was doubtless a Communist. But I couldn’t help liking him as a human being.”), this black spot, the accusation of lying during the missile crisis, had always remained. At the Moscow

meeting, Dobrynin had taken his chance to confront Gromyko the legend in front of Kennedy's men, to relive the traumatic moment when he learned the truth of the secret missile installation, when he "aged ten years" in an instant. He was now relieved of a personal burden, his name and his conscience cleared.

The conversation continued to bring new revelations and a deeper atmosphere of trust. Alexander Alekseev, the Soviet ambassador in Cuba in 1962, told us about the night of Friday the 26th, the height of the crisis, and how Castro had spent the night in the Soviet embassy and they had spent hours drafting the letter to Khrushchev. But Alekseev said it was not Castro but the Americans who were planning "a pre-emptive strike" in the form of an imminent invasion of Cuba.

## The Man Without a Name Appears in the Room

We then came to the next to last session. I looked across the table and saw a face. It was a man sitting behind Gromyko in the chairs along the wall kept for the Soviet aides and personal staff. I could not believe it. I stared right at him to be sure. He looked the other way. I had first seen that face two years earlier. And I would never forget it.

It all started on a warm day in late May during the 1986–87 academic year, when I was living in Moscow and completing my Ph.D. dissertation on Soviet approaches to crisis prevention. Dmitry, a Russian friend and my martial arts teacher, had invited me to his home for a lovely long Russian afternoon dinner. He had introduced me to a man in his mid-fifties described as a relative. The relative invited us to lunch a few days later. When we met, the relative spoke about “Vladimir,” a colleague of his at the conference he was attending. As it turned out, this colleague, Vladimir, was joining us for the lunch. I saw a sumptuous lunch on the table, with black and red caviar, the finest Armenian brandy—all my favorites.

I wanted to hurry back to my work, but it felt awkward, and the lunch was truly excellent. The relative started proposing toasts to peace, and good US-Soviet relations and so forth, and Dmitry and the other fellow Vladimir joined them, and so I joined them. They asked me questions about my work at the university, my impressions of the Soviet Union. I decided that, as it might be the last time this year I would spend time with my friend and teacher Dmitry, that I would just relax, enjoy my favorite foods, and forget about trying to do more work that afternoon.

Just as we reached the ice cream stage, my friend and his relative said that they had to go downstairs for a while to see Dmitry’s father-in-law. I was left alone with the fellow, Vladimir. I continued the conversation, wanting to make the best of the situation. Vladimir then said he had been to America many times. This was surprising to hear. We had all been speaking in the familiar form of address in Russian, and I spoke to him in the familiar form (Russian has a familiar form of “you”—*ty*—and a formal form—*vy*—comparable to the French *tu* and *vous*). He immediately said: “Yes, let’s speak in the familiar. *Let us be frank*. Should I speak in English?”

I could feel him tighten, which often happens when someone starts to speak a foreign language. I said: “For the sake of a change, sure.”

“I am a high-ranking KGB officer,” he began in very good English. “I have been commissioned to make to you a proposal.”

I sat back in my chair.

“You know,” he said with a smile, “this is a ‘highly organized’ society.” He paused for effect, pleased with the phrase. “We have been watching you closely, quite closely. We know about your connections in Peredelkino (where my friend the Soviet writer Anatoly Rybakov lived and kept an anti-Stalinist manuscript), and at TUZ (a theatre where I had been present for closed staff discussions in the first days of *glasnost*)...”

“Let’s be frank. You are a clever guy. You have all the objective prerequisites to

become a top—the top—Sovietologist, in America. You have the prospects. You will be advising the presidential candidates...”

I flashed back to a phone conversation that I had with William Ury a month before. I was on the phone in my room at Moscow State University, and Bill had called from Boston, mentioning that the dean at the Kennedy School at Harvard had asked for advice to give Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis on his policy toward the Soviet Union. Dukakis had lectured at Harvard, and was at the time leading George H.W. Bush in the polls.

“There will be no risk to you,” Vladimir continued. “We will not contact you in the States. Only here. Only on Soviet territory.”

He switched back to Russian, as my Russian was fluent, better than his quite good English. “No risk. Only myself and one other person know about this meeting. We will not ask you to do dirty tricks, to ‘kill so-and-so,’ or crawl under barbed wire.”

You are not like a Kennedy, or a Michael Murphy. Your family does not have millions. Right now you’re living in a rented house at Harvard with three other graduate students. You have to think about your future. About supporting a family. *You need a feed line.* It will not be possible right away to supply you with hard currency. But when you are here, rubles are no problem. You will receive your visa like anyone else—when no one is getting their visa, you will not either—so as not to stand out. We are talking in terms of decades here...

These past couple months you have not been devoting much time to your dissertation. Very little time in the past couple months. What you have now is not bad. But it is rather gray. We can make it so that your dissertation *shines* [*blestela*]. So that they will look at it and say: “That’s the guy!”

I thought of the Faustian bargain. Here I was, with this fellow actually in front of me, about 55, nearly bald, making me such an offer.

To do your work you need access. This is your lucky chance. To do your work, you will need consultations with specialists, to collect materials. Let’s begin tomorrow.

You are an American. We are not talking about doing anything to the detriment of your people. We need conditions of peace. The Soviet Union needs three things: to improve Soviet-American relations, peaceful coexistence and the prevention of nuclear war. We are talking about high ideals.

As I got over the initial shock, I struggled to think how to respond. It was a brilliant set-up. I was totally vulnerable. I was now completely drunk. He seemed to know everything about me—and my close friends. I was caught completely off-guard, having been invited by Dmitry, by someone whom I had come to trust. I was alone in a place I had never been before, and none of my friends knew where I was. At that moment I was not even sure of my physical safety—perhaps they would arrange a car accident on the way back or create some pretext for my arrest. (Just months before, Nicholas Daniloff, correspondent for *US News & World Report*, had been ensnared by the KGB in the woods on the Lenin Hills not far from my dormitory and thrown into Lefortovo prison, released later in a tit-for-tat exchange with an arrested Russian spy in the US.) And the KGB could easily end my academic work and my entire career by denying me a visa. They had already done that for the past three years to a Danish journalist friend, Samuel Rachlin, and to Stephen Cohen, a leading Soviet expert at Princeton.

I had the thought that I had to choose right that second: either stand up and go for the door or continue to be completely friendly and open and try to connect with this human being in front of me, and relax the situation, try to get my head clear, and

appear open, to listen and not refuse but not accept. I felt that trying to leave would not be safe. I looked at him and told myself to relax.

I struggled to focus. I told him that it was not completely unexpected that they might arrange such a meeting. I could understand that they would want to find out where I stood. I told him that I was not really interested in assistance with my work. I would do my work by my own efforts.

“No, we will not be *doing* your work for you. We will just point the way. It is like digging a tunnel from Bombay to London. Some people dig randomly. Others *know* where they are digging.” He looked at me and smiled.

“You need access,” he emphasized. “You need to meet with specialists, you need materials from the archives, you need to come to Moscow for more research.”

“Are you saying,” I asked, “that if I do not go along, then you will close the door? If this is a threat, then you will turn me anti-Soviet. I do not think that is in your interest.”

“To make you an enemy is not hard. But who needs that? What we are talking about is high ideals—improving US-Soviet relations, the prevention of nuclear war.”

A conversation with a friend in Boston just a few months before, in April, immediately came back to me, as if he had been prescient. The friend had asked me whether the KGB or CIA had contacted me. He made the point: If the KGB can hook you on anything, they will have you. I also thought of a book on the KGB that Bill Ury had given me, which talked about their tactic of trying to get a person to do small things for them, then to threaten to blackmail the person if he wants to quit.

“It is a question of high ideals,” he repeated this approach.

“It is not a question of ideals, it is a question of means,” I said. “In your work, you have to cover up [*skrivat*] what you say and do. That is not something that is natural to me.”

“Yes, there is an element of sensitivity [*delikatnost*]. You cannot go out on the street and say anything. At first it is a little unusual. That’s to be expected. You will get over it. There are some things you do not tell just anyone, aren’t there?”

“You will be writing about your year here,” he continued. “Articles in *The New York Times*. You have been in the center of the *perestroika*. You have had an unprecedented exposure to life here. You are more in position than anybody to write about this year,” he said, flatteringly. “You will need materials for your book. Do you have chapters already planned? Let us help you collect those materials...”

He then placed 400 rubles (\$650) on the table and said: “So that you do not have to stand in line for cheese. Take your friends to a restaurant...”

I told him that I was not interested in taking the money and he immediately switched tactics: “Let’s forget about money. What we are talking about is high ideals...”

I told him again that it was not a question of ideals but of means.

“You will get over the psychological barrier. You create it yourself. You will get over it.”

He continued to question and persuade. The waiter came into the room several times to bring food and clear the table. I had a sudden impulse to try to catch the waiter’s eye and somehow signal that I needed help; but then I realized that he must be part of it all.



Dmitry never came back. I continued my approach of neither accepting nor refusing. I could tell that “Vladimir” was starting to think through what he was going to do with me. He then raised the idea that maybe we should not try to resolve anything right now and that we should meet again in a couple days. He added: “You know there is a certain sensitivity in all this. You won’t be seeking advice from anyone, will you?”

I told him that, as I did not know who is working for whom, I doubted that I would want to talk to anybody about this meeting. At that moment I began to wonder: who knows who is already working for the KGB? Who among the Soviet experts I know, the US Embassy personnel? I did not plan to discuss it with anyone.

He then affirmed, “Yes, let’s meet again on Friday and continue our conversation.” All I could think of was finally getting out of that room. He said he would call me. He went with me down the elevator to the street and I got into a taxi.

I returned to my university dorm room. The next morning, I went to my martial arts practice and saw Dmitry, who immediately apologized for not returning to the hotel room, saying they had to take his father-in-law to the hospital. I said that I understood.

I went back to my room. The phone immediately rang. “It’s Vladimir. How is everything? His final line: “See you later”—in English.

On Friday June 12, I met Vladimir as agreed in the same hotel room. To do anything else could have compromised my visa and ability to work in Russia. Again he had a couple bottles of the finest Armenian brandy and another sumptuous lunch. I told him that I did not want to drink.

“Just symbolically,” he said, and raised a toast.

“You did not consult with anyone did you?” he asked. I had not gone to the US Embassy, or met with anyone deliberately, as I assumed they were watching my every move.

We made general conversation, over an undercurrent of tension and then I said: “I gave thought to what you said. I do not want to receive any help. I will do my own work. We share the ideals of improving US-Soviet relations, and preventing nuclear war.”

He continued to press, as if he had not heard what I said, alternating flattery and offers with thinly veiled threats. He then said that I needed more time and that we should continue to meet. I purposely chose not to have a drink at our subsequent meetings and told him: “I do not want you to hinder me, or to help me.”

“I did not expect that you would immediately come running, embrace me, sob on my shoulder,” he said. “Let’s have this mutual understanding. We will meet. We will forget about money, the material elements. That is base—an affront to moral values. You will come [to the Soviet Union] freely. We will meet and exchange opinions, argue and disagree. And when you want, just say, ‘Give me a hand, guys.’”

The following week my colleagues from the Harvard Joint Study delegation arrived in Moscow. I then discussed the whole affair with Bill Ury in whispers during a morning run in the park next to the Armand Hammer Center, where we were staying. Bill advised me to report to the US government that the KGB had contacted me when I returned to the States. He stressed that I should inform the US government because in the future the KGB could try to blackmail me by telling the US government that I had meetings with them while in Moscow. The US government would ask me why I had

not reported it. If there was a resurgence of McCarthyism, or if I wanted to work in the White House and receive a security clearance, then they would certainly find it suspicious if I had not reported it.

I was wary of the consequences for my visa if the word got back to the KGB that I had reported their recruitment effort. I trusted that Bill would keep the whole affair in confidence. At the very time the KGB tried to recruit me, there was in fact a top-level CIA counterintelligence officer, Aldrich Ames, who was spying for Moscow. He was providing the KGB with the names of all US agents, at least ten of whom were then executed. My report would certainly have come to his attention. He started taking money from the KGB and spying for the Soviets two years earlier in 1985. It was not until 1993 that he was arrested. Ames compromised more CIA assets than any Soviet mole in US history.

After my colleagues in the Harvard delegation departed, “Vladimir” called and wanted to meet. I arrived at the hotel. It was, of all days, the Fourth of July. I told him that I did not want to eat lunch. I told him that I did not want to encourage them. That it was absolutely clear that I did not want to receive assistance. He repeatedly asked me questions about the Harvard meetings that had just finished: “Who was interested in what topic?” “What did this delegation member or that one think?” I kept changing the subject. He then produced two tickets to the “Festival of Indian Culture” for the next day at the Lenin Stadium. He handed them to me. I did not want to accept them, to establish the precedent of taking anything they gave me, even theatre tickets. I said that was interesting and set them down on the table.

I could tell that he was beginning to realize that I would not talk to him. “Well,” he said, “we are talking about the coming decade here. Three months, six months. This is neither here nor there.”

“I thought you would act according to American pragmatism, a mutually beneficial deal,” he said with affected disappointment.

“The KGB is not an ordinary firm,” I said. “You personally have had to get used to covering up, which you have to do in intelligence work [*razvedka*].”

“Let’s forget about such big words as ‘*razvedka*,’” he said. “We will just meet and discuss, disagree. Don’t you think it would be beneficial to have discussions with me?”

“For me, it’s not natural,” I said. “It’s not for me.”

I think just to see how I would respond, maybe to make a last stab at getting some information, or hooking me, he asked: “Tell me, honestly, why didn’t you join the CIA?” “I know,” he said deliberately looking right at me, “that you like O’Brien-ffrench...” “And *Mission Impossible*. Agent Zero Zero Seven...”

I asked him why he thought that. “I think you know,” I said, “because in my room at the university I have many times told friends the story of Conrad O’Brien-ffrench.” O’Brien-ffrench was a dashing figure who, as a captain in the British Expeditionary Force in 1914, had been severely wounded in the Battle of Mons and taken prisoner by the Germans. After numerous failed escape attempts, O’Brien-ffrench was put in the highest security prison at Augustabad. He was allowed to exchange letters with a woman friend in England, and used invisible ink to transmit details of troop movements and other strategic information, including a prototype for a new German bomber, which he gathered from incoming prisoners. After the war, O’Brien-ffrench

was summoned to Whitehall and invited to join MI6, the British Secret Intelligence Service.<sup>14</sup> He had extraordinary adventures in his life. In 1920, he was assigned to escort Russian diplomat Leonid Krasin through countries hostile to the new Communist government to meet Prime Minister David Lloyd George in London for secret talks on restoring trade with the West. In 1939, O'Brien-ffrench worked to gather intelligence about German military preparations under cover as a businessman. He was known as Agent Z3. In those years he often met a fellow Brit named Ian Fleming at bars, on ski slopes in the homes of mutual friends. O'Brien-ffrench's style, athletic endeavors, and adventures were reported to have provided Ian Fleming with some of his inspiration for his character James Bond. I had met O'Brien-ffrench many times in the final years of his life in his chalet in Colorado. He was also an accomplished artist, author, and mountaineer.

I was sure that Vladimir must have heard me speak of O'Brien-ffrench from listening devices in my room at the university. "No, cross my heart," he said, and looked at me.

I looked back at him and wondered what he was up to. It struck me as strange that he brought this up. I had told Bill Ury in whispers on our morning run that, of all the possible hooks—money, special access, career—the most tempting one for me was the whole romantic aspect of a life like Conrad O'Brien-ffrench. There was no way that Vladimir could have heard that conversation. I felt this was actually his last attempt to hook me, to get me to play for the romance of it all. It was spot on.

On the 19th, Vladimir called me in my room at the university. He made some small talk, with a palpable undercurrent of tension. He asked about my visa extension. I had a bureaucratic problem with my visa extension from July 15 to July 30. I am sure the KGB intervened to make sure my visa was extended to the end of July just in case I changed my mind.

I met him for what I hoped was the last time in front of the Central Tourist Home, where that first encounter had taken place six weeks before. I told him that I thought we would just be together for a half-hour, and why don't we just take a walk in the adjacent park. It was a warm, sunny afternoon. I told him that my position remained final. It was immediately clear to me that he/they had made the decision to completely back off. He tried to be as friendly as possible, asking about my final weeks in the Soviet Union, my plans to write about the experience. "Come as often as you like," he said, "the door is always open." He deliberately repeated this several times.

"You have an unprecedented range of connections here," he said, "from the dissident writer Rybakov," he paused, "to an employee of the KGB." He asked me about what I planned to write when I returned. I told him that I was planning to write some articles for magazines and papers. He suggested *Foreign Affairs*.

He then said that he had a small gift for me. He pulled from his attaché case an article from the Soviet press about American Sovietologists. I had not seen it and was interested to read it. He then pulled out something that looked like a small dictionary. He handed it to me. I thanked him, and then looked more closely. It was *The Bible* in Russian. It was one of the limited number of *Bibles* published in the Soviet Union by the official Russian Orthodox Church. At the time the official press published a token number of them so that they could say that the *Bible* is published in the Soviet Union.

"I was going to inscribe it 'From Russia with Love,'" he joked.

“Why don’t you?” I said. He wrote the inscription but, as I expected, halted and did not leave a signature.

I told him that I also had something for him. I happened to have my copy of Gary Larson’s *The Far Side* cartoons in my briefcase. Somehow I had been inclined to bring the Larson book and, for whatever reason, giving it to him after his gift had a certain delightful incongruity. He joked that I should inscribe it: “From America with Love.” I did and signed my name.

We walked further along the pathway, through a Russian birch grove. “What will you say when the FBI contacts you in the States?” he queried.

“I don’t think I need to complicate matters by reporting this,” I said.

“Tell me honestly,” he asked, “did you expect us to contact you?”

I told him that while it stands to reason that they would, I had not really expected it. He gave me a Russian hug. “God bless you,” he said smiling, as I got into the cab.

I expected that Vladimir would call me on my next trip to Moscow. I wondered how to handle it. In fact, *every time* I returned to the Soviet Union for the next two years, no matter what city, whether Moscow, Leningrad, or Khabarovsk, when I checked into my hotel, the moment I stepped into my room the phone would ring: “Hello, Bruce. It’s Vladimir.”

I refused to meet him again. He told me that if I changed my mind, all I had to do was to leave a message at the reception desk in *any* Soviet hotel where I was staying addressed “To the Director” and he would call me back.

“Vladimir” had called me the very day I had arrived for our Moscow conference on the missile crisis. As soon as I stepped in my room, the phone rang. He said that he wanted to meet and, enigmatically, that “he had something important for my career.” I refused to meet, thinking it was some new tactic in his recruitment strategy. And now he had appeared in the meeting room! I could not believe that I was looking at him again. I now believe that he had been working in the Soviet Embassy in the US or in Cuba during the missile crisis, or had some actual information to share with me. I think he actually wanted to be a part of the event, to come out of the shadows.

As soon as the session ended, and everyone stood up, I grabbed the arm of Bill Ury and told him that the KGB agent who tried to recruit me was in the room. We looked, but he had disappeared, slipped out a side door and vanished just as mysteriously as he had appeared.

But I would still meet “Vladimir” one last time, in the most unlikely circumstance.

### Three Different Crises Become One

The Moscow meeting was coming to a close. We had learned more about the near apocalypse in 1962 than anyone could have expected. The three sides were now beginning to share one story of the event, rather than three unconnected accounts of three “different” crises. And the dialogue had not only been informative, it had been a remarkably profound human interaction. As we came to our final session on the lessons of the crisis, Georgy Shakhnazarov stressed that the “greatest value” of the meeting was not in the details and causes of the conflict—what he had always called the “detective story.” Shakhnazarov focused on the unprecedented nature of the process itself. He saw the greatest value in the fact that we had managed to meet at all. “There have been very few examples in the past,” he mused, “when representatives of hostile or conflicting nations sat down around one table to investigate seriously and in a businesslike fashion what had occurred, and to draw lessons for the future.”

Shakhnazarov went on to affirm that what we had done at the meeting was truly rare and extraordinary. He imagined what it would have been like had representatives from Rome and Carthage gathered after the Punic Wars to meet to consider what sparked the conflict, exchanging information and coming to a shared view about preventing such conflicts in the future.

“Only after decades of Cold War and of estrangement and confrontation,” he continued, “have we realized the necessity to cast off our prejudices, to sit at the round table and reason together about how to preserve life on earth.” Shakhnazarov said that our discussion has been “open-minded and open-hearted, with no sign of evil design.”

As I reflect back on that final session, listening to Georgy Shakhnazarov, I can only say that it was a rare and extraordinary moment in history. Here was the Soviet leader’s closest personal aide speaking words about being “open-minded and open-hearted,” about “reasoning together.” And it was not mere political rhetoric. Here was an idealist, a noble human being, who was setting high moral standards for himself and all, seeking to transform very difficult conflict—and Gorbachev delivered on the promise. Gorbachev was a visionary leader, who, together with his team, attempted to steward a complex process of large-scale social change. Gorbachev and his team initiated the policy of truth-telling, of *glasnost*, which began to dissolve the inner wall of fear in Russians formed during the years of Stalinist terror. They responded to the pressure for change in the society. They knew that life could not continue as before. They then took steps to discard a confrontational ideology, to end the arms race and the isolation of his country.

The world would then witness dramatic change in Soviet society and the spectacularly nonviolent collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall violated all “realist” expectations of great power conflict. The two sides had thousands of nuclear weapons, tanks, and other conventional weapons that were never used or fired. Some have already forgotten how great an achievement it was that the Soviet empire collapsed without a global conflagration.<sup>15</sup>

These were inspired individuals and inspired times. Gorbachev's team had a vision of a peaceful world, a post-Cold War world that left behind the historical NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation. They called for a "common European home." They had for several years used the example of the Cuban Missile Crisis as part of their "new thinking," which Shakhnazarov in that final session of our meeting summarized for us as "the collective wisdom of our postwar experience." He stressed how they were working for a "de-ideologization of international relations," which had been exemplified by Gorbachev's remarkable address to the United Nations just weeks before.

Shakhnazarov then opened the floor for consideration of lessons. We would move to consideration of our shared interests in the present and future—"Level Two" of conflict transformation, the transactional level of how to craft agreements that could satisfy the interests of the parties. Some spoke of the need to negotiate new agreements to restructure and reduce military forces and nuclear weapons, to reduce the risk of accidental war, and agree on "rules of conduct" to avoid a future clash.

But the senior veterans of the crisis focused on very human elements. McNamara began: "I think the first lesson, to me as a participant, was to learn, in a way I have never forgotten, that human beings are fallible. And I think we've seen much evidence of that yesterday and today. We are subject to misinformation, miscalculation, and misjudgment." Ted Sorensen, Kennedy's confidant and speechwriter, added: "there is plenty of blame to be shared by all three countries which are represented here today... and there is no such thing as precise calculations of the future of our actions."

These were the words of the veterans of the crisis, chastened by the experience of slipping to the brink of Armageddon. It was the veterans of the crisis who began to move the dialogue to "Level Three," beyond the transactional level of satisfying shared interests to a focus on our shared humanity—and our shared fallibility.

Shakhnazarov then mused on how to transform the conflict and find a new shared identity: "Politics on both sides have been highly ideologized, and... each bloc has tended to see the other side as an eternal foe. As a result, the danger of nuclear war has always been there. But we must never lose touch with our true subjective feelings. Nothing is as valuable as life... We must never forget this."

But the lessons articulated around the table in Moscow in 1989 would be largely forgotten or disregarded in the years that followed. Like the lessons of Vietnam. The Soviets had already stumbled into Afghanistan and the US would follow and then invade Iraq. Would that all political leaders could truly learn the lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as had the chastened and more humble veterans of the crisis. The experience of 1962 led them to find the humility to fear the unintended consequences of military action and have greater respect for the potential "collateral damage"—the lives of innocent civilians and the destruction of infrastructure and the natural environment.

The idealist position that Gorbachev took ultimately cost him his job. I would watch the unraveling of Gorbachev's team in the year after our Moscow meeting, in 1990, which ironically was the year Gorbachev received the Nobel Peace Prize. Gorbachev had let the Berlin Wall fall in 1989. He was willing to let the Warsaw Pact dissolve. Shakhnazarov and other Gorbachev advisors expected that NATO, the Western military alliance formed to counter the Warsaw Pact, would then have no reason to

exist and could also dissolve. This would have been a truly transformative outcome. In 1988, Anatoly Chernyaev, Gorbachev's top foreign policy aide, would write in his private diary after a meeting he attended between Gorbachev and German leader Helmut Kohl: "I felt physically that we are entering a new world, where class struggle, ideology, and, in general, polarity and enmity are no longer decisive. And something all-human is taking the upper hand."<sup>16</sup>

The fact that Gorbachev gave up Soviet control of its satellites in Eastern Europe without a battle, that he let the truth be told about Stalin, that he opened the economy to the market, enraged members of the conservative Soviet old guard, who were up in arms (soon literally) because, in their view, Gorbachev had reformed too much and was allowing the Soviet Union to break apart. At the same time, the most liberal figures in the country and several of his own advisors began to fault Gorbachev for going too slow, for his "hesitancy" in economic reforms, for his "delay" in decentralizing Union-republic ties (particularly with regard to the Baltic republics annexed after World War II), and above all for his "misplaced faith" in the ability of the Communist Party to reform.

Western leaders for the most part happily accepted the collapse of the Soviet Union. We could have dissolved NATO, heeding the call of many top former officials and experts, including America's most senior Soviet expert George Kennan, and created a new joint security organization. Instead, we kept the old Cold War symbols, pocketed our gains, and pushed NATO to the Russian border. When asked why he did not respond with an iron fist as political power slipped away from him, Gorbachev said he could not bring himself to use violence.

The US and European allies' decision to push NATO to the Russian border played a major role in evoking the subsequent nationalist reaction under Putin, who promised to "lift Russia from its knees," and led to great scorn toward Gorbachev at home for "giving in" to the West. It was a milder version of what happened after we humiliated Germany in Versailles at the end of World War I.

Boris Yeltsin, then the elected president of the Russian Republic, had led the break with Gorbachev, rising to fame after he stood against the August 1991 coup attempt by the conservative hardliners. Yeltsin then moved to dissolve the Soviet Union, hailed as a moment of triumph by many in the West, and, with a group of impressive liberal democrats, then launched aggressive steps to implement radical free-market reforms and establish multi-party based elections.

The dominant point of view in the West was that these developments were all very gratifying and very positive. Yeltsin launched a drive at blinding speed to replace the old one-party system with "democracy."<sup>17</sup> The Yeltsin revolution, however, alienated major factions in the country, creating a new class of billionaire "oligarchs," leaving millions of pensioners in poverty, causing crime and prostitution to soar. Yeltsin's policies exacerbated and fueled an anti-democratic reaction that, within a few years, would bring back into power in Russia a nationalistic regime, inflame anti-Western militaristic tendencies and adversely affect Russian democracy, just as George Kennan had predicted.<sup>18</sup>

## The October Crisis—Fidel Castro's View

Georgy Shakhnazarov was supposed to lead the Soviet delegation for our meeting in Havana in January 1992, but he has to cancel at the eleventh hour. The Soviet Union had officially dissolved just two weeks before. Gorbachev had passed the nuclear launch codes to Boris Yeltsin in his Kremlin office in a humiliating final encounter. Shakhnazarov told us, "I am now an aide to a man who represents only the memory of a country."

The first evening we travel to the old Havana section of the city for a reception with Fidel and brother Raúl at the Presidential Palace, which was Cuba's equivalent of the White House before it was turned into the "Museum of the Revolution." We were told that Fidel and Raúl never appear together for security reasons; yet they were both in the neo-classical grand reception room, decorated half a century earlier by Tiffany and Co. of New York. That day I would watch McNamara greet Castro, whom he had never met face to face. Before the head of the Cuban delegation can position himself to introduce the most senior member of the American group, McNamara extends his right hand to Castro: "Robert McNamara, sir." Taken by surprise, Castro steps back, stares at McNamara, clasping his hands over his belt. You could have heard a pin drop in the large crowded hall. A broad smile then breaks out across Fidel's face, as he extends his right hand: "So, Mr. McNamara, we meet at last. Welcome to Cuba."

I also see Castro greet former CIA Deputy Director Ray Cline, who led the operation that first photographed the missile sites in 1962. Cline was also undoubtedly involved in the many covert operations to kill Castro. As he greets Cline, Castro exclaims that it is a great pleasure "to find out who the person was who found us out!" Cline then remarks that he is grateful to have received a visa to attend the conference. Castro steps back, feigning a look of shock, and says: "Why, Mr. Cline, it is our pleasure. Allow me to say how grateful we are that—this time—you *asked* for one." Castro smacks Cline on the shoulder, who is a full foot shorter than Castro. They meet, as someone would say, "beard to beard." Many would then quite accurately refer to Cline as "the man who resembles Hemingway."

Castro is at his charismatic, charming best. I receive one of Cuba's finest Cohiba cigars from his hand. His longtime personal translator, Juanita Vera Garcia, is so good that you feel you are conversing directly with Castro, though he is speaking only Spanish. He tells us that he had recently stopped smoking. Ted Turner and Jane Fonda had recently been in Havana, and, Fidel says, they talked of exercise and quitting smoking.

After the reception, we Americans depart to have a final planning session. As we are leaving, an excited Cuban journalist trying to get interviews rushes up to us, shouting: "Where's the Khrushchev?!" "Where's the Khrushchev?!" He obviously knew that there was "a Khrushchev" to be found somewhere. We point the befuddled Cuban journalist to the Russian delegation.

Back at McNamara's villa (we were lodged in Cuban government guest residences),



we Americans begin our last planning meeting. We know that Castro definitely wants to participate personally in these meetings to ensure that Cuba is not left out of the high-profile dialogue. Castro was enraged that Cuba had been marginalized in the crisis itself, treated as a mere “parking lot” for Soviet missiles. Castro remained furious for decades that Khrushchev did not even consult him before announcing the Soviet withdrawal of the missiles.

We agreed that when Castro showed up at the conference meeting, Bob McNamara would try to ask him certain key questions. We expected Castro to show up, maybe late at night, and speak for hours. Castro, the most loquacious leader of modern times, would likely subject us to a peripatetic monologue of the kind for which he is justly famous. We were apprehensive because one of the Cubans familiar with Castro’s ways had suggested that their commander-in-chief might attend the conference, or he might meet us at the airport, cancel the conference, and take us to a mountain hideaway, or on a tour of the island. He might, we were told, do anything. He told us that the really important conversations would undoubtedly occur in unexpected places, probably in the middle of the night. “I want a serious discussion,” Arthur Schlesinger says emphatically, “and I don’t see how that is possible when we are exhausted or bouncing around in a Soviet jeep.” We had been told that Castro “rests by talking.”

We planned certain key interventions designed to open up a productive dialogue, just as we had done before the Moscow meeting, where McNamara had inspired candor in others by acknowledging that, had he been a Cuban, he would have believed that the US was planning to invade Cuba. We needed again to get the meeting off to a good start at the basic “Level One,” to find a way to encourage all parties to see the perspective of the other side.

In Havana, that act would be a simple acknowledgment of a basic fact about Cuba, which had a huge impact on Castro. Early in the meeting, McNamara would acknowledge the Cuban success in achieving a very low infant mortality rate. Castro would later say: “we are honored” by this statement.

It is so simple to make such small signs of respect that open up a conversation. But it is rarely done. Ultimately, it is human beings sitting around the table, and most people respond extremely well to positive acknowledgment. We made no concessions in matters of fact and substance. We were doing what William Ury calls being “hard on the problem, and soft on the people.” Respect is low cost and high return. “This remark is very, very encouraging,” Castro continued, “because most of the time what we get are snide remarks.” This small acknowledgment had great impact on Castro and I am sure contributed to his openness, disclosure, and praise for the process. Why do we withhold acknowledgement of the accomplishments of our enemies and rivals?

To our amazement, Castro arrived the first morning of our meeting and sat in the room from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day for three days, and extended the meeting to a fourth day. He astonished everyone by keeping quiet and just listening most of the first day. He then made respectful and substantive comments, quoting from documents, with a surprising degree of objectivity. Schlesinger would later applaud Castro for his participation: “I’d like to express, as a professional historian... our gratitude to President Castro for his talk, his discussion, his analysis, his disclosures, and his remarks this morning. I hope he will set an example for all heads of state. It would enormously facilitate the job of the historian in trying to reconstruct the past.”

Castro was so *disciplined*. No one can remember when he did not go into marathon flights of patriotic Cuban fury. He was sitting there with the “culprits” who were responsible for hostile actions against Cuba and which have achieved almost mythic status in the rhetoric of the Cuban Revolution. He made very few overlong interventions, he lightened particularly sensitive discussion with humor; and he took an evident delight in the process of reconstructing the crisis, of learning as well as instructing. Many of us judged, therefore, that Castro had consciously decided to use this conference in every way possible to persuade the influential former US officials in the US delegation that he did indeed seek rapprochement with the United States, whether or not as a matter of principle but certainly as a matter of necessity in the post-Soviet world.

The collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union had brought Cuba’s close relationship with the Soviet Union to an abrupt (and, from the Cuban perspective, untimely) end. To Castro, clearly it grated like an unresolved cadence. He could not, and did not, blame the Russians sitting with him at the table, all of whom share his grief and his anger at the Soviet Union’s demise. But there was no mistaking his quiet rage, a rage that recalled his sense of abandonment and humiliation during the missile crisis itself.

I finally had my opportunity to ask Castro about the critical events on Saturday October 27th, when he sent the cable to Khrushchev calling for a pre-emptive nuclear strike. I asked why there were so many confusing accounts of that day in memoirs and other sources, including a clearly inaccurate report that Castro himself pressed the button that shot down the American U-2 spy plane, and further riddles about communication with Moscow. Cuban moderator Jorge Risquet dismissed my question as having already been answered. Russian General Dmitri Volkogonov then gave a terse answer. Risquet then asked me “Are you satisfied?”

But at this point Castro himself decided to respond. He would speak for the first time of his letter to Khrushchev calling for a pre-emptive nuclear strike. “I could add a few more points,” he began, “which I think are necessary for a full understanding of the problem.” Castro then gave his longest comment to that point in the meeting and energetically tried to explain how the order to shoot at over-flights was connected to his letter to Khrushchev written on the night of October 26–7.

The letter to Khrushchev, he said, had been misinterpreted. Perhaps it was due to the hurried translation. Fidel said that his letter was meant to bolster Khrushchev’s resolve, to convince him that he should under no circumstances cave in on *Cuba’s* behalf, and to make clear that Cuba would stay the course—all the way to annihilation, if necessary. Fidel then claimed that the letter could not have influenced the solution, which had already been worked out by the time Khrushchev received his full letter on the 28th. But in fact a short version of the letter did arrive by telegraph by 2 p.m. on the 27th, so Khrushchev did receive it before announcing the withdrawal of the missiles; it clearly had a huge impact on his decision to broadcast the removal of the missiles over open radio and to leave Castro completely out of the process.

Castro then addressed this critical question for the first time:

...on that night of the 26th, we saw no possible solution. We couldn’t see a way out. Under the threat of an invasion, of an attack, with the enormous propaganda using all the mass media, and an international campaign talking about this very serious problem, we really couldn’t see any solution.... And I asked myself, “What is

still to be done? What remains to be done? What can I do? What is the last thing I can do?" And I dared to write a letter to Nikita, a letter aimed at encouraging him. That was my intention. The aim was to strengthen him morally, because I knew that he had to be suffering greatly, intensely. I thought I knew him well. I thought I knew what he was thinking and that he must have been at the time very anxious over the situation.

...Actually, I was recalling the events of the Second World War and what had happened during the Second World War. As you all know, during the Second World War, Soviet troops were taken by surprise...

Castro claimed his intent was to tell Khrushchev to be resolute, ready, not to vacillate, or they would be defeated. The comparison to WWII seemed quite a stretch.

Later in the meeting, though, we would get a clear picture of Castro's mindset, driven by nationalism and fanaticism. It is what shocked us most of all. Castro was truly ready for nuclear war. It was a peculiar product of the Cuban singular experience, the mythology that they had created in their struggle as a small nation against a neighboring goliath. Castro was completely resigned to the fact that they were all going to die if the US invaded. And it would be a heroic death for a just cause.

Castro said that he was confident that the tactical nuclear weapons they had from the Soviets would have been used if the US invaded, and that the US would respond with nuclear weapons. "If an invasion took place in the situation that had been created," Castro stated, "nuclear war would have been the result. Everybody here was simply resigned to the fate that we would be forced to pay the price, that we would disappear." Castro argued further:

Before having our country occupied—totally occupied—we were ready to die in defense of our country. I would have agreed, in the event of the invasion that you are talking about, with the use of tactical nuclear weapons. You've asked me to speak frankly and, in all frankness, I must say that I would have had that opinion. If Mr. McNamara or Mr. Kennedy had been in our place, and had their country been invaded, or if their country was going to be occupied... they would have used tactical nuclear weapons.

But, in his mythic (and mortal) battle against the enemy, and belief in the heroism of the Cuban people and their just and righteous struggle, Castro never once referred to the consequences for the larger world, the fact that it would bring global Armageddon. To be fair, McNamara also said that the US would have responded with tactical nuclear weapons had US invasion forces been attacked with them. The consequences would have been the same—in McNamara's words: "Absolute disaster for the world."

The initial launch of the medium-range SS-4 missiles from Cuba would have immediately devastated Washington, DC, New York, Miami, New Orleans, and other cities in this range, leading to a massive US retaliation against Moscow, Leningrad, the entire Soviet homeland. As we learned at our meetings, the warheads for the SS-4 missiles had been delivered to Cuba and were ready for launch (but the planned longer intermediate-range SS-5 missiles were never delivered). We did not discuss targeting at the Havana meeting; but it stands to reason that the strategic weapons would have been issued targeting instructions, and one would have to think, given the low accuracy/high yield of the technology at the time, that the targets would have been the cities most worth destroying—certainly triggering a full-scale thermonuclear exchange between the US and Soviet Union.

Kennedy fortunately resisted calls for an invasion. And Castro was in position to prevent the escalation to all-out war even if the US had invaded. But it would have meant capitulation. Castro had no thought that it might be better to refrain from using the tactical nuclear weapons against a US invasion, to negotiate to save his country, to

avoid triggering a global nuclear catastrophe, rather than defend his little island to the death.

When the US announced the blockade, Castro had immediately announced that they would fight “to the last person.” We would see similar behaviors from revolutionary leaders of other small countries. In Libya, the Gaddafi regime chose to let the country be devastated and “fight to the last bullet” rather than capitulate to rebels and the demands of the established big powers—of France, the UK and the US.

The frank admissions by Castro and others gave an immediacy and electricity to the atmosphere in the meeting room. It seemed the veterans of the crisis felt free to tell truthfully what they actually thought and did—regardless of how it might be judged. We had developed a strong “container” for dialogue. Hard truths could be spoken. People reflected in real time.

We then came to our final session, when we planned to consider ways to repair US-Cuban relations. There was so much energy and enthusiasm for our exploration of the crisis that we decide not to end the conference on Saturday as planned, but to continue the next day to have more time to consider ways to break out of the thirty-year conflict between Cuba and the US.

When Jim Blight raised the question about meeting on Sunday, Castro replied: “I have no objections. Whatever you decide is all right with me. Tomorrow is Sunday. For us it’s a working day anyway, so we are not going to sacrifice anything, and it’s very pleasant to be here talking with you.”

Janet Lang presented Fidel with an official American League baseball, autographed by the members of the Kennedy administration present. Jim added: “When I say that this is an American League baseball, I mean for it to be interpreted as the official baseball of the Western Hemisphere.” Laughter follows. “I’ll receive it in full confidence,” Castro says, “I’m not going to imagine even for a minute that there is a bomb inside.” [Laughter and applause.]

The next morning we went to the Hemingway Museum, and met again at 2 p.m. for the previously unplanned session. At the end, Castro said: “I must say with absolute sincerity that I have learned a great deal at this meeting.... I believe the spirit with which we have discussed this here has been excellent—the respect for each other’s opinions, the sincerity, the honesty. I think I have been witness to a method that is very suited to debating very complex and difficult issues.”

Castro then started to talk of common threats, of environmental dangers, of increases in violent hurricanes due to climate change and prolonged droughts. He called for cooperation to address shared interests. We had finally started to touch “Level Two” of conflict transformation in US-Cuban relations. Castro underlined that the US had broad cooperation with China, whose socio-political system is different, suggesting that the US could approach Cuba similarly. We had some interests that were shared, some that were opposed, some that were just different. So why couldn’t we craft some agreements and begin to build a working relationship? This was clearly a probe to begin to normalize US-Cuban relations.

Castro ended on a very personal note: “I would like to thank you all for your kindness. I would like to thank you for your attention, for your patience, with my many interventions.... I will leave here with a very deep impression, with a great hope, with the satisfaction of having had the opportunity to participate in something as

constructive, as noble, as positive as what has taken place here.”

We had spent four days together and the final appraisal by a decades-old enemy was one of “great hope”: the dialogue had been constructive, noble and positive. He expressed his appreciation for the kindness shown him.

Yet everyone knew that, for the foreseeable future, US-Cuban rapprochement was politically impossible because the US had set the condition of free and fair elections, a demand tantamount to abandoning Castro’s brand of socialism. Castro could no more do so than a leopard could change its spots. It was not a proposition to which he could say “yes.”

We then had a near fiasco at a final press conference. Speaking to the press always carries risks. But we got off to a good start. McNamara began with a balanced, positive note. He endorsed normalized relations, saying categorically: “There is no threat to US security from Cuba today.” He stated further that “we should move away from talk of invasions; we should find a way to normalize relations between our two countries, and to move to addressing the problems that we each have and the world has.... We must get beyond the fear, the hostility, that have shaped our relations over the past thirty years. That is what I take away from this meeting.”

Then, as so often happens, the questions from the press put everyone into a defensive-reactive mode; they feared being quoted out of context in a complex and sensitive situation. A reporter asked a question about the status of John Kennedy’s non-invasion pledge, a very complex issue, and the respondents proceeded to get bogged down in an intractable debate about legal and political subtleties. Then Cuban Politburo member Risquet blamed the US administration for the current impasse, but made a claim that “the group of Americans here present have explained that they will work for normalization.”

This created an extremely awkward situation for the Americans. Arthur Schlesinger had to intervene to explain that “this is not a delegation but a collection of individuals.” He said he had long supported rapprochement and lifting the embargo. But so as not to appear as uncritical supporters/stooges of Castro, and knowing that any statement would be scrutinized in the world press, Schlesinger balanced his statement with a comment that “Cuba does not, in our view, observe civilized standards with regards to political, intellectual, and artistic freedom.... I would say it would greatly facilitate the task of those like myself who favor rapprochement with Cuba if Cuba preserved a more generous and honorable dialogue with regard to those who believe in peaceful debate national dialogue and peaceful dissent.”

Schlesinger’s effectively calling them “uncivilized” stung the Cubans. They had to respond. El Commandante Fidel Castro was just down the hall, watching the press conference on closed-circuit video.

So Cuban UN Ambassador Carlos Lechuga spoke to counter this remark by Schlesinger, and it led to a downward spiral of recrimination, a minor international crisis. Lechuga claimed that all Cuban dissidents were CIA agents. The moderator quickly called the press conference to a close. None of the journalists in the room could quite believe the protestations of all three delegations that the closed-door sessions had been harmonious and productive.

In a small private meeting with Castro afterward, it was clear that he was stung by the statement that Cubans did not observe “civilized” standards. He asked Schlesinger

if he understood how difficult it was for them to operate in conditions of what he calls a “double blockade”—the decades-old US blockade plus the loss of key trade ties with the former Socialist camp after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He spoke of ongoing security threats to his country.

The spirit of dialogue we had developed over the four days was for the moment lost in response to primitive questions from the media, and political posturing. Had Risquet not tried to speak on behalf of the “group of Americans,” suggesting they had cozied up to Castro, which required a balancing statement from Schlesinger, it all might have ended on the positive, noble spirit of the sessions themselves.

In Havana, we achieved more than half of what we hoped to achieve. We moved forever beyond our separate stories of the most dangerous moment in human history. We created a full three-dimensional view of the 1962 event. We had great success at “Level One.” Fidel had fully added the Cuban perspective. And he did so quite respectably. We had begun to see the “whole” truth, transforming the past into a new shared memory. And we gained some measure of collective wisdom from reflection by all parties to the conflict.

With regard to the changing the future, Castro made probes toward normalization of relations with the highly influential former American officials around the table. We started to broach “Level Two” questions of whether we could reach agreements on shared interests. Castro showed his human side, and focused on the future. He also did not shy away from admitting that he was prepared for annihilation in 1962 in defense of their revolution. And three decades later, he was still committed to a political and economic model that was rejected around the world. He argued that the US and Cuba could cooperate as the US did with China. Yet at that time there was still too much change required from both sides to take further steps toward rapprochement. Had the US lifted the embargo, engaged Cuba and opened relations, I believe Castro would long ago have had to change or lose power. Confrontation has served Castro’s regime very well. For decades he has been able to point to the ever-present external American threat to justify media censorship and suppression of dissent. Engagement would have taken away that weapon Castro used so effectively to control his own people. It would have given the local population much greater exposure to life outside its island bunker, to economic trade and the free market, raising expectations for openness and change.

Though the Havana dialogue was not able to catalyze any immediate shift in US-Cuban relations, the missile crisis retrospective clearly played its part in helping to end the US-Soviet Cold War, showing the value of bringing those who played a key role in critical historical events together in a deliberate process of dialogue. In Kurosawa’s film *Rashoman*, we never learn the “real” story of what happened, because those whose lives collided that day never meet again, never look back and reflect together. After most violent events, wars, or crises, as often happens in our own personal lives after a conflict or an argument, each side usually just lives with its own one-dimensional story and writes its own history. With major historical events, scholars typically work much later to put the whole picture together as best they can. In the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, we convened the actual participants face to face and looked back, and we looked back using a very deliberate method and applying the skills honed by the best practitioners we could find. Can we use this method and process going forward?

The Cuban Missile Crisis did give us the perfect reason to look back so we could move forward—it was the most dangerous moment in human history. Another critical success factor in our Moscow meeting was the support of Georgy Shakhnazarov. You must find politically important figures who are open to the spirit of dialogue. To the surprise of many, Robert McNamara played a leading role in the Cuban Missile Crisis retrospective, and later travelled to Vietnam. There is also a recent effort regarding Iran.<sup>19</sup> The experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis retrospective gives us at least some reason for optimism that it may never be too late to change the past.

## A Final Chance Meeting

It was early September 1993, and I was driving with a colleague to Kazan Station to take the Moscow-Kazan daily train #28, which departed at 6:15 p.m. I was travelling with a well-known specialist on ethnic relations for a meeting the next day with President Mintimer Shaimiev of Tatarstan, who had been leading the drive for greater sovereignty and independence from Moscow. Some believed that Russia might follow the fate of the Soviet Union, and dissolve into ethnic states.

We were very late due to a traffic jam on Moscow's Garden Ring road. We got out of our car and the driver ran ahead of me, helping with the suitcases of the American professor. We had seats booked in the First-Class Sleeping ("Soft") Car, the very last car at the far end of the train platform in Moscow, so that when we arrived in Kazan it would be the first car in front of the main station entrance.

There was a large stream of people moving toward the exit, as we entered and pushed our way down toward the end of the train. It was a stream of faces, many oriental Tatar features, colored outfits, all carrying or pulling large bundles. There was also the smell of urine, with drunks lying along edge of the wall. I was ill at ease because of the growing crime level in Russia since the Soviet collapse. I had travelled to Kazan a few months before and was fortunate that in my cabin was a thirty-five-year-old officer from the General Staff, Yuri, who took it upon himself to guard me and my companion during the trip. He said he was sent to deal with the Kazan Mafia. There were problems with crime in Tatarstan even before the advent of market reform and the fall of the Soviet Union.

Suddenly I was stopped cold by the sight of a face moving toward me. I saw the face of "Vladimir," the KGB officer who led the effort to try to recruit me. It was *him*. I dropped my bag. As he pushed past me on his way forward in the crowd, I grabbed him by the arm. He turned, looking at my face, showing no recognition. I had grown a beard.

"Bruce Allyn" I said. He stared and began to recognize.

"Ahh..." he mouthed silently, looking me in the eyes.

"This is no accident [*eto nesluchaino*]," I said, knowing it was indeed an accident and yet the odds were impossible that we would run into each other in a city of twelve million.

"No," he stated emphatically, "it is an accident"—meaning that he was not *working*, that he was not deliberately assigned to follow me. The unmistakable shock on his face conveyed to me that he was telling the truth.

Still taken by the strange confluence of events that would bring me and him face to face again, I looked at him and said: "The world has changed a lot since you and I last met."

"The world has changed *completely*," he stated like a dazed witness of the impossible.

Neither he nor I had time to formulate another thought, as the train was pulling



away. I quickly took out a business card and said: “I am back in three days. Call me!”

I am not sure if I knew what I would have said next had we had time to react to the bizarre intersection of worlds. I jumped ahead to get on the train and Vladimir turned on, alone in the irritated throng pushing toward the exit. I stepped into the cabin thinking that Vladimir’s shoes looked cheap and old.

Vladimir had most certainly been retired. The KGB had been split and reorganized, but by no means dissolved. I was thinking that he was poorly dressed. I would never forget that face.

And I never again heard from “Vladimir.”

The train lurched forward and the American professor and I got into our cabin. The train pushed out of Moscow and onto the flat, swampy forests and consecutive villages, with wood paint peeling off the occasional green or blue little house among those mostly dark gray. The leaves were just turning. It was the start of a cold spell.

The train continued, banging and swinging. The fear of contact had gone, now replaced by a common and less romantic fear—the ordinary anxiety about crime. I had wired our cabin door shut with bailing wire, as I always did when travelling by train in the former Soviet Union. Out the window the forest turned into naked trunks of white birch, where the swamp had overtaken the little grove and the trees had died, leaving white masts like a massive shipwreck.

## AFTERWORD

Fifty years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, two decades after the Moscow meeting, what was the fate of the key participants?

### **Andrei Gromyko (1909–1989)**



Five months after our Moscow meeting, after surprising us with a belly laugh, Gromyko would die, telling his son in his final days that he regretted his support for Gorbachev. Within a year of our Moscow meeting the Berlin Wall would fall. The Soviet Union collapsed two years later in 1991. Exactly twenty years earlier, at the height of his career in 1971, Gromyko had proudly trumpeted to the world the status and power of the Soviet Union, which he had helped create: “Today there is no question of any significance [in international relations] which can be resolved without the Soviet Union or in opposition to her.” But today the Soviet Union is gone. Gromyko blamed Gorbachev and also himself for his decisive role in supporting Gorbachev at the Central Committee meeting in March 1985.

### **Georgy Shakhnazarov (1924–2001)**



Georgy Shakhnazarov remained a loyal supporter of Gorbachev to the end. After the Moscow meeting, he would be at Gorbachev's side as he tried unsuccessfully to balance the interests of the radical democrats and the Soviet old guard. The last phone call that Mikhail Gorbachev had on August 18, 1991, before the hardline coup-plotters seized him and cut off his contact with the outside world, was with Shakhnazarov.

Four months later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Shakhnazarov would tell us that he could not lead the Russian delegation to Havana. He would go to work for the nonprofit Gorbachev Foundation. He continued his professional devotion to peaceful democratic reform and conflict resolution.

Shakhnazarov died of a heart attack en route to give a talk at Yasnaya Polyana, the birthplace and home of Lev Tolstoy, where Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*, where he would live until his final years, when he became a champion of nonviolence and opponent of war who would have a profound influence on Gandhi, and on Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, and others.

### **Robert McNamara (1916–2009)**



Two months after the missile crisis, McNamara would give the speech in Paris in which he told the world that, had they not stepped back from the brink, likely in excess of 150 million people would have been killed. He would state that the whole notion of winning a nuclear war was meaningless. The following spring, after that fateful October, President Kennedy would tell McGeorge Bundy that he wanted to give a major address on peace. Ted Sorensen put together the initial draft. Kennedy would then give the famous commencement address at American University calling for a ban on nuclear testing and a new phase in US-Soviet relations. His “dovish” speech specifically acknowledged the experience of the other side, saying that no nation had “ever suffered more than the Soviet Union in World War II.” It was a strong “Level I” intervention to open a new dialogue. Many hoped for a new era of peace. Kennedy was assassinated five months later, in November 1963.

McNamara continued as Defense secretary under Lyndon Johnson. By 1966, McNamara began asking himself what the United States was doing in Vietnam. He instructed his staff to begin compiling a top-secret history of the war, which was later leaked to the world as “the Pentagon Papers.” After resigning from the Pentagon, McNamara continued to work relentlessly as president of the World Bank. Three years after our meetings on the Cuban Missile Crisis, McNamara would break his 27-year silence and write that the American war in Vietnam was “terribly wrong.” He would travel to Hanoi with Jim Blight and Janet Lang to meet his war-time foes, work to

open the archives, to catalyze improved trade relations and efforts to resolve question of POWs. Some maintained that he deserved only scorn and lasting moral condemnation, saying that what he took from the soldiers who died “cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades later.” Others found the initiative courageous and helpful in improving relations. Most agreed he was a haunted man in the decades after Vietnam: “He could be seen in the streets of Washington—stooped, his shirttail flapping in the wind—walking to and from his office a few blocks from the White House, wearing frayed running shoes and a thousand-yard stare.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Anatoly Dobrynin (1919–2010)**



Dobrynin remained an advisor to Gorbachev until the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. When Dobrynin died in 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev paid tribute: “There can be no overestimating Anatoly Dobrynin’s personal contribution to resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis and normalizing Soviet-American relations. His outstanding abilities as a negotiator and analyst earned him the respect of both colleagues and opponents, and his goodwill, deep knowledge and wealth of life experience won him the respect and liking of everyone around him.”

Dobrynin was indeed a likeable man; but he always known to be a staunch defender of Soviet interests. So he treated the collapse of the Soviet Union as a disaster completely avoidable, as the product of the blunderings of “our incompetent but highly ambitious leaders” who had been lured by Western flattery into betraying their country’s interests.

### **Sergei Khrushchev (1936–present)**



Sergei kept the promise he made to his father to ensure that his uncensored memoirs reached the world. He worked for years as a resident scholar at Brown University to produce the only completely reliable and full three-volume English translation of his father's words dictated at their dacha, which Sergei carefully had typed and hidden. Strobe Talbot called the three volumes "One of the most extraordinary archives of the twentieth century."

### **Fidel Castro (1926–present)**



Castro remained committed to telling the story of the Cuban Missile Crisis and to try to use it to improve Cuba's relations with the United States. Ten years after our 1992 Havana meeting, Fidel would host the 40th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis. McNamara, Sorensen, and Arthur Schlesinger would travel to Cuba, along with many members of the Kennedy family. The participants came, in the words of one veteran, to learn more about an episode that "changed their lives in ways that still make them shudder." That we came within a whisper of nuclear annihilation was reinforced by a new revelation: A Soviet submarine off Cuba, which a US destroyer was trying to sink, was carrying a torpedo tipped with a nuclear warhead and two of the three Soviet officers wanted to launch the nuclear torpedo. Some participants applied the lessons of stepping back from the brink to President George W. Bush's deliberations about whether to strike Iraq. "It's not just a conference of remembrance,"

Ted Sorenson said, “it’s also a conference of reconciliation. And that is a pretty good message to a world on the verge of war.” Five months later President Bush, with the ardent support of his Secretary of State Condi Rice, launched the invasion of Iraq with his “Shock and Awe” campaign.

In 2010, Castro admitted he was wrong to call on Khrushchev to launch a preemptive nuclear strike to obliterate the US. “After I’ve seen what I’ve seen,” he told a journalist, “and knowing what I know now, it wasn’t worth it all.”

Fidel Castro plans as usual to greet the 50th anniversary of the crisis in Havana.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> On December 24, 1962, in a speech to NATO foreign ministers in Paris, Robert McNamara stated: “After a full nuclear exchange such as the Soviet bloc and the NATO alliance are now able to carry out, the fatalities might well exceed 150 million.... The devastation would be complete and victory a meaningless term.”

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch (eds.), *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27–28, 1989* Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University (Harvard University, 1992); Allyn, Blight, Welch, “Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana and the Cuban Missile Crisis” *International Security* Vol. 14, No. 3 (Winter, 1989–90), pp. 136–172; Blight, Allyn, Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse* (Pantheon, 1992); See also chapter on the Cuban Missile Crisis in the classic college textbook *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Elisabeth Bumiller, *Condoleezza Rice: An American Life* (Random House, 2007). Also Jacob Heilbrunn, “Consent and Advice” *New York Times*, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/books/review/Heilbrunn2-t.html>

<sup>4</sup> Condoleezza Rice, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family* (Crown, 2010), p. 184–85.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, *Condoleezza Rice: An American Life*, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> See Fyodor Burlatsky, *Khrushchev and the First Russian Spring* (Scribner, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Initially Primakov echoed the standard Soviet line, pointing to the “American tendency to fall into the technical when what really counted was the political.” To him, it was the relationship that really mattered. He believed that the US needed to involve the Soviet Union as an equal partner in addressing Middle East politics. “You can hardly expect the Soviet Union to cooperate with the US on measures like crisis prevention unless we are treated as an equal. We don’t want to help you with your policy when you are acting for unilateral gain; why should we make the crisis any easier for you?” He saw crisis management as manipulation of risk to achieve unilateral gains. He said that cooperating with the US on crisis prevention would only give the Reagan administration an incentive to continue pursuing its aims unilaterally. That would only encourage the US in being irresponsible in conducting its foreign policy.

<sup>8</sup> As he would later write in his memoirs, President Reagan had an advance screening of “The Day After” film at the White House and it had a profound effect on him personally, bringing home to him the horror of a real nuclear war and influencing his decision to work seriously with Gorbachev. Reagan, who spent his career in the movie industry, was profoundly influenced by a television film, as were the perceptions of tens of millions.

- <sup>9</sup> Graham Allison, William Ury, Bruce J. Allyn (eds.), *Windows of Opportunity: From Cold War to Peaceful Competition* (Harper & Row, 1989).
- <sup>10</sup> William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (Doubleday, 1999).
- <sup>11</sup> See description of the “generative spiral model” in Andreas Priestland and Robert Hanig, “Developing First-Level Leaders” *Harvard Business Review* (June 2005). <http://hbr.org/2005/06/developing-first-level-leaders/ar/1>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/30/world/62-missile-crisis-yields-new-puzzle.html>
- <sup>13</sup> Blight, Allyn, Welch, *Cuba on the Brink* (Pantheon, 1992), pp. 481–491.
- <sup>14</sup> Conrad O’Brien-french, *Delicate Mission: Autobiography of a Secret Agent* (Skilton & Shaw, 1979).
- <sup>15</sup> In his book *Armageddon Averted* (Oxford, 2006), Stephen Kotkin gives the most comprehensive and persuasive analysis of how the Soviet empire collapsed without global violence. Now Professor of History and International Affairs at Princeton, Stephen was a doctoral student with me at Moscow State University in 1986, and, I remember well, the first friendly face I saw when I returned to the dormitory drunk, sick and in shock after the KGB launched its recruitment effort.
- <sup>16</sup> Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).
- <sup>17</sup> See Timothy Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (Basic Books, 2008).
- <sup>18</sup> George Kennan, at the time America’s most senior Soviet expert, warned against expanding NATO: “Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era. Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”
- <sup>19</sup> See James Blight, Janet Lang (et.al), *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979–1988* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).
- <sup>20</sup> Tim Weiner, “Robert S. McNamara, Architect of a Futile War, Dies at 93” *New York Times* July 6, 2009. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/us/07mcnamara.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/us/07mcnamara.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

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